
Jews in the Polish Narratives on Rescuing Jews (1968–1989)

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Abstract: This article analyzes the image of people of Jewish background as presented in the Polish narratives on rescuing Jews, published in the press of the Polish People's Republic. The proposed methodological framework is the Bechdel test, applied in the film studies discourse and originally employed as a tool showing the type of women's presence in films. The author analyzes the material researched in light of the recurring narrative clichés and the discursive order that sets the tone for speaking about the history of Poles and Jews during the German occupation, while at the same time attempting to verify whether and in what way Jews are even the subjects of these narratives. The conclusion is rather negative: Jews serve in the discourse as a pretext to talk about the heroism of Poles and to reassert both the national community and international opinion concerning their noble attitude in the face of the Holocaust.

Keywords: antisemitism; Holocaust; Polish-Jewish history; Polish public discourse; politics of memory; Polish public discourse in the Polish People's Republic; Poles rescuing Jews during the Holocaust; Righteous Among the Nations

Introduction

The awkward redundancy in the title is intentional. After all, the subject of the article was to be how Jews are present in Polish narratives about rescuing... well, Jews. “Rescuing Jews” has become somewhat of a phrasal verb that describes and determines the relations between two nations, two communities. First of all, by laying down the fundamental and indisputable difference: there are Poles and there are Jews; thus Jews are not Poles. Therefore, Polishness is not a question of citizenship¹, but of belonging to a constructed ethnicity, sometimes referred to as “national”, as the term “Jewish nation” is also employed at times. The criteria governing said constructions are a separate topic. Secondly, some are being rescued, and thus passive, implicitly weak, while some do the rescuing, and are therefore heroic and selfless. Thirdly, “to rescue” (Polish: *ratować*) is virtually the only verb that is admitted in the public discourse in reference to “Polish-Jewish” relations during the German occupation. One acceptable noun is “indif-

1 Jews may at best be Polish citizens of Jewish origin, which suggests some act of inclusion that took place at some unknown point in time, while Poles are simply Poles; their citizenship is irrelevant. Besides, citizenship cannot be a fully inclusive category if the fundamental value around which the majority group organizes itself is the national community: national history and culture. In our times, this is clearly visible in countries where migrant citizens or their descendants face open or concealed discrimination. The matter is complicated (or perhaps simplified) by the fact that Jews were not considered an ethnic minority in the Second Republic of Poland (unlike Ukrainians or Germans); at most they were deemed a religious minority, but religion, at least from the second half of the 19th century ceased to be the sole determinant of Jewish identity and self-definition (for more on Jewish identity dilemmas and attempts at self-definition, see: Kijek, 2017).

ference”, but this word describes a state and not an action; thus, if Poles “did” anything at all to Jews, it was this – rescuing them². Fourthly, if Poles did any rescuing, it was precisely of Jews; no other form of resistance against the occupant is referred to by the use of this verb. The others are: the entire nation’s fight; the common fight. Rescuing means reaching out of the community to the Others. The Others are Jews.

Of course, it could and should be said that the difference between Poles and Jews during the Holocaust that took place in the occupied territories of the pre-war Polish Republic was established by Germans, who employed detailed acts of law to define a group of people subject to persecution and extermination, by which they sentenced all Jews to annihilation, while those inhabitants of these lands whom the Germans deemed to be non-Jews were oppressed in other ways. And yet, Poles understood this difference very well,³ they “assimilated it”, internalized it and transferred it onto the ways of talking about the wartime past. I was interested in how this difference manifests itself in the Polish narratives on rescuing. I particularly wished to ascertain the position occupied in them by the rescued. How are they talked about, are they even noticed? Is it possible to identify concrete Jews, the still living, single individuals amidst the mass of “saved Jews”? The answer, which there is no point in putting off, is probably not. But the attempt had to be made.

Dates

The subject of the query were Polish narratives on extending help to Jews, published in the press between 1968 and 1989. The starting date marks the antisemitic campaign, started in 1967, after Israel won the Six-Day War, the culmination of which is considered to be the March 1968 events, as a result of which people of Jewish origin were removed from their positions in the party apparatus; in the military; state and economic administration; at universities, ultimately followed by the “March emigration”, where between 10 and 20 thousand Jews were forced to leave Poland. The year 1989, in turn, marked the end of the Polish People’s Republic in its political and economic form, the abolition of institutional censorship, and the emergence of new media and new communications circuits, which resulted in a modification of the topics and rules of discourse raised in the public debate. This is not to say that the manner of speaking about “Polish-Jewish relations”, the Jewish Holocaust and the Polish attitude toward the extermination of their Jewish neighbours had changed drastically. Rather, it was broadened to include new voices and perspectives. Some attempted to process critically the problem of the

2 As Hanna Krall put it when interviewed by Elżbieta Janicka and Joanna Tokarska-Bakir: “This is also a division into those who could rescue and those who had to be rescued. It’s a lot nicer to rescue than to be rescued, isn’t it?” (Janicka, Tokarska-Bakir, & Krall, 2013, p. 15).

3 Which would not have been this easy without the pre-war antisemitic training.

Polish attitude toward the Holocaust (and so, in broadest terms, the manner of “witnessing” it, both as rescuers of Jews and as accomplices to Germans or as their co-perpetrators in the persecution and murdering of people of Jewish origin). Others articulated the most radical antisemitism stripped of any guises, practised with the use of traditional, often pre-war antisemitic clichés, which up until then had not been accepted in the public discourse. This, importantly, does not mean that antisemitism did not exist in the public debate of the Polish People’s Republic: it certainly did, but not in this form. Selecting 1989 as the time limit of the conducted query has, besides the practical dimension, i.e. narrowing the amount of material studied, also a more substantive advantage: it allows one to better perceive which tropes and ways of speaking about Jews and Poles in the context of the Holocaust, and which patterns of narrating Polish help given to Jews, were already constituted and practised in the period of the Polish People’s Republic. This allows one to better grasp their long duration and to confirm that the conditions and content of the public debate in the Third Republic of Poland did not undergo a profound qualitative change in this regard at all: rather, new elements were added to the established pattern; or counterarguments, strategies and rhetorical tactics were selected in relation to this pattern. I mention this because many contemporary researchers of the Polish memory of the Holocaust and of the public debate on Polish-Jewish relations in its context adopt as an important watershed the publication of Jan Tomasz Gross’ *Sąsiedzi* [Neighbours] (Gross, 2000). They demonstrate convincingly that the basic reaction to the story of the Jewish massacre in Jedwabne in 1941 at the hands of Poles was a backlash – going even deeper into the trenches of “defense of Polish innocence” and Polish reputation, intensification in the sphere of historical politics organized around the myth of Polish heroism, martyrdom and indomitability, the “pedagogy of pride” contrasted with the alleged “pedagogy of shame” that was to be promoted by liberal circles and the ruling faction of leftist provenance at the beginning of the 21st century (headed by President Aleksander Kwaśniewski, who apologized for Jedwabne in 2001). The consequence of this was the inability to look critically at one’s own (Polish) history and work through the trauma of the Holocaust (regardless of whether it would be the trauma of witnesses or the trauma of co-perpetrators). I do not intend to argue with these diagnoses; rather I want to bring up the fact that the reaction to Gross’ book was underpinned with clichés and rhetorical patterns according to the rules of discourse that had existed much earlier, and which crystallized precisely during the antisemitic campaign of 1967–1968 (see: Forecki, 2010).⁴

4 In the first chapter of his monumental publication, Piotr Forecki analyzes the Polish memory of the Holocaust in the Polish People’s Republic by starting with the case of Encyclopedia authors, which preceded March 1968. Michael C. Steinlauf (2001) also wrote of the Polish memory of the Holocaust in 1944–1995. Elżbieta Janicka (2015) polemized with Steinlauf’s concept of “memory repressed” in her text entitled *Pamięć przyswojona. Koncepcja polskiego doświadczenia zagłady Żydów jako traumy zbiorowej w świetle rewizji kategorii świadka* [Memory Acquired. The Concept of the Polish Experience of the Holocaust as Collective Trauma in the Light of a Revision of the Concept of Bystander].

Historian Feliks Tych wrote, on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the March events (and thus two years before the publication of *Sąsiedzi*) that Polish society had never been “cured of antisemitism”, which made the March antisemitic campaign possible. In turn, its effect was to “legalize antisemitism in postwar Poland”, which “continues in fact to this day, although it now extends beyond the sphere of the March victors in power for the next twenty years” (Tych, 1998, pp. 23–27). Michał Głowiński, in his exemplary analyses of “March talking” (Polish: *marcowe gadanie*), showed that the stereotype of “merciful Pole – ungrateful Jew” solidified and resounded most clearly in 1968 (Głowiński, 1995, p. 5), providing an indelible context for all narratives about Poles rescuing Jews created in later years. Synthetically, the rules of narration about Poles, Jews, Germans and World War II were presented at the time in the documentary film *Sprawiedliwi* [The Righteous], directed by Janusz Kidawa, based on a script by Ryszard Gontarz, one of the most active publicists of the March propaganda⁵. The iron pillars of this narrative, findings elevated to the status of laws and axioms, remain in principle valid to this day (with some significant shifts) and can be summarized in five points. First, Poles suffered and were persecuted during World War II; second, they suffered the most (the General Government is depicted in the film as the first ghetto, and the sign with the letter P – as “the first sign of shame”); third, Poles helped Jews through sacrifice, solidarity and at the risk of their lives, for which, as the fourth narrative pillar, the Germans murdered them⁶; fifth, the Jews are now ungrateful and have forgotten who their saviours were, vilifying them in the eyes of world public opinion.

5 The film aired on TV, preceded by an introduction by Gontarz. Nowadays, it can be seen on YouTube, on the WierniPolsce1 channel. Comments below the film, such as: “This film should be distributed in the US, in English” prove its unwavering “topicality”. Alicja Podbielska notes that in 2016 the film was shown in Łódź as part of a retrospective of films about the rescuers, organized, among others, by the Marek Edelman Dialogue Center, as a film “based on documents and witness testimony”, which had aired on television only once and then was shelved due to the antisemitic campaign. Janusz Kidawa’s family, on the other hand, opposed the showing of fragments of this film at an anniversary exhibition about March at the Polin Museum in 2018 (see: Podbielska, 2019a, p. 376). The film was also analyzed by Tomasz Żukowski (2012).

In later years, after 1989, Gontarz complained in the right-wing press that he and other representatives of the “national opposition within the party”, such as actor Ryszard Filipiński, had been censored in the People’s Republic. In 2000, under the pen name Jerzy Brochocki (2000), he wrote the book *Rewolta Marcowa – narodziny, życie i śmierć PRL* [The March Revolt – the Birth, Life and Death of the People’s Republic of Poland], popular in ultra-nationalist and antisemitic circles, according to which the March events had been nothing more than a war of factions within the apparatus of power. In the 1980s, he was an activist of the “Grunwald” National Union with nationalist inclinations.

6 The fourth point usually takes the form of a persistent reiteration that in Poland (“only in Poland” is sometimes added) there was a death penalty for helping Jews. This reiteration often escalates into an unimaginable danger (as if one could be killed for merely offering water to a Jew), or into collective responsibility. For example, Mateusz Szpytma, vice president of the Institute of National Remembrance, said in an interview for the Polish Press Agency in March 2023: “Entire families risked the death penalty for helping Jews. Even the very act of refusing to denounce could be – and sometimes was – punished”. The construction “could be” and “sometimes was” (PAP & Szpytma, 2023) is interesting.

“There was a death penalty for this” becomes an indispensable, ritualistic formula both for all stories concerning Polish aid to the Jews (as we will see in a moment) and the main argument for defending Polish innocence, as Jan Błoński (1987) already pointed out in his essay. *Za to groziła śmierć* [There Was a Death Penalty for This] is the title of the third volume of memoirs collected by Władysław Smólski and published in 1981 (Smólski, 1981), but the phrase is currently readily picked up by various local communities commemorating the local “rescuers” (see, e.g.: *Za to groziła śmierć – Rabczanie z pomocą Żydom* [There Was a Death Penalty for This – Rabka Residents Helping Jews], 2012). The death penalty for hiding Jews was introduced in the General Government (it was not in force in the areas directly incorporated into the Reich) by Hans Frank’s decree of

In Kidawa's film, Jews do not form a community or fellowship; they are portrayed as a "passive and stupefied" mass, a little helpless, a little naive, not always cooperating in attempts to save them, instead willingly collaborating with the Germans, unreliable and treacherous to each other. The film fleshes out the contrasts in the ghetto: children are starving to death in the streets, while dressed-up representatives of the Jewish establishment (walking around in furs and without armbands, the Wendland sisters, some of only a few representatives of the Jewish community mentioned by name) stumble over their bodies as they leave restaurants awash with expensive liquor. Kazimierz Sidor, appearing in the film as a former soldier of the Peasant Battalions, "admits" that Jews were rescued even by people associated with the national movement before the war (Jan Mosdorf), though mostly by people with leftist ideals. In today's narratives about rescuing Jews, the rescuers are primarily Catholics, or rather Catholic families, but the basic grammar and arithmetic of the story remains the same, including the persistent use of the imperfective aspect of the verb "to rescue" and including the calculation presented in *Sprawiedliwi*, which recurs to this day: "it is estimated that the cooperation of twenty Poles was needed to hide one Jew". What is most important is that Poles did the rescuing, and not whether or not this was successful, as Jews in reality play a supporting role in the story, and even more frequently, the role of extras. They are pretty much absent from these narratives, which is an ostensible paradox; they are not even present as characters painted with antisemitic tones, as in the documentary by Kidawa and Gontarz⁷. This perspective has basically prevailed until the present day, the best exemplification of which is the project and exhibition *Wezwani po imieniu* [Called by Name] organized by the Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valour, to which I will return later in this text.

15 October 1941. The decree was aimed primarily at Jews and punished them with death for leaving their designated districts. "People who knowingly give shelter to such Jews shall be subject to the same penalty". Sentences were handed down by Special Courts, and in the case of lesser infraction the death penalty could be commuted to a long prison sentence. Martyna Grądzka-Rejak and Aleksandra Namysło, historians at the Institute of National Remembrance, have collected 333 documented cases of repression for helping Jews, involving 654 people, 258 of whom were executed by the Germans; some of the others died in concentration camps (Grądzka-Rejak & Namysło, 2019).

Historian Alina Cała (and earlier Jan Błoński) points out that the death penalty was also imposed for other forms of resistance to the Germans, including hiding partisans, yet Poles hid them more willingly (Zychowicz & Cała, 2009). In the Polish countryside, on the so-called fringes of the Holocaust, the way to avoid punishment was to turn Jews over to the Polish police. Sometimes the local German administration also offered rewards for exposing Jews in hiding or Poles helping them. For more on this, see: Engelking (2011); Engelking & Grabowski (2018); Grabowski (2011).

- 7 Alicja Podbielska wrote about the use of the figure of the Righteous in March propaganda. The author points out that the March discourse referred to arguments formulated soon after the war and it was merely a vulgarization and amplification of them. It might be then said that the Polish antisemitic discourse (or, as some may prefer, the discourse in defence of the good name of Poles) is of a cumulative nature; essentially immutable in its core but enriched with new rhetorical figures at times of successive "crises", inventing new historical policy devices and new heroes (such as the Ulma family, and earlier Irena Sendler). Podbielska also convincingly demonstrates that the claim, repeated in the discourse of today's historical politics, that the communists only recalled communist merits in rescuing Jews does not stand up to confrontation with the sources. On the contrary, the solidary assistance of the entire nation, regardless of political beliefs and class, was already firmly emphasized at this point in time. My source research emphatically confirms this diagnosis (cf. Podbielska, 2019a).

Sources

The selection of the source material for the research, i.e. the press, requires clarification. I used the most important titles of the communist era, as well as less popular but still significant press titles, primarily the Catholic press, whose diversity during the People's Republic of Poland seems underestimated today, as does the diversity of the official press at the time, noticeable especially in the late 1980s⁸. Again, such a selection of the type of sources has, in addition to practical advantages, a substantive justification: it allows us to focus on one type of medium, taking into account the characteristics of the functioning of this medium in social context. The printed press seems to be the primary source of knowledge for historians, cultural historians, political scientists or those engaged in the study of discourse, since it is the "place" where it is easiest to see this "discourse", which consists of the statements of representatives of the so-called "symbolic elite", i.e. "experts, publicists, journalists, editors, writers, authors of school textbooks, clergymen, scientists, intellectuals and politicians appearing in the mass media" (Czyżewski et al., 2014). They establish the range of topics important to society, prioritize them and shape the way they are talked about, themselves being subject to the rules of discourse. I understand discourse here in the spirit of Michel Foucault, as a certain manner of social and public speaking, something that is "at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality" (Foucault, 2002, p. 7). Of significance to me is that for Foucault, the subject of discourse control are procedures, not individual people. Thus, in my reflections, I adopt the view that the rules of discourse can "govern" utterances in ways not always realized by those who make said utterances. The work of a discourse is not only control and selection, but also reproduction and redistribution.

For a historian of culture, a review of the press from the period of the Polish People's Republic appears to be a valuable source for several other reasons. In the seventies and eighties, the press was one of the most popular media, although at the same time the role of television was on the rise. Nevertheless, TV archives are not as readily available as old issues of the printed press. The press of the communist period had high circulation figures, was subsidized by the state and, although it was subject to legal and po-

8 The *Gość Niedzielny* weekly differed significantly from the intelligentsia-oriented *Więź* (Warsaw) or *Znak* (Kraków); similarly, *Mysł Społeczna*, published by Caritas and richly illustrated, presented a completely different profile than *Tygodnik Powszechny*, which struggled for its independence. Authors such as Ryszard Bender (a member of the editorial board), Juliusz Braun, Janusz Korwin-Mikke, Marcin Wołski, Jerzy Robert Nowak, Krzysztof Czabański wrote for the Catholic *Ład* weekly, published by the Center for Documentation and Social Studies in the 1980s. After 1989 they either joined the far-right press with its often antisemitic bias, or made more or less successful political careers in right-wing groups, or simply became architects of the new historical politics. Adam Hlebowicz has been since 2017 the director of the National Education Office of the Institute of National Remembrance, Jan M. Ruman (deputy editor-in-chief of *Ład*) is the editor-in-chief of the *Bulletin of the Institute of National Remembrance*, Krzysztof Czabański heads the National Media Council.

litical censorship, it was not subject to the requirements of the “free market”, which gave it a paradoxical independence from the demands of readers. This makes it “thick”, rich in contents; it has extensive foreign services and long-winded historical analyses, debates, essays. The issue of whether and how all of this was read is, of course, a completely different question. At the same time, the fact that it was subject to the control of the authorities makes it a fitting field for observing the place that the topics of interest to us occupied in the official discourse, although in principle, one should not overestimate the homogeneity of this discourse in People’s Poland, especially in its late period. In addition, the specificity of the print media, the accumulation of articles, headlines and photos in close proximity, makes it a kind of “showcase” of information and commentary, which allows us to put the analyzed articles in their context, to look at how events and topics are prioritized, what is the “order of the day”. Finally, the press is to some extent an “interactive” medium, even under conditions of limited freedom of speech: articles provoke polemics, polemics turn into debates, readers send letters and corrigenda, distinguishing newspapers from books, which are intended for individual reading and, once printed, less susceptible to vivid reactions from readers (which does not mean that such reactions are not evoked, most often precisely in the pages of the press).

The written material on the broadly defined “Jewish subject” in the Polish press of the period in question can be divided into several thematic areas: the issue of Polish antisemitism (or the “difficult Polish–Jewish relations”); the extermination of Jews during the war (in particular, the Warsaw Ghetto before and during the uprising), including, of course, the history of Polish aid to Jews; the history of the Jewish community in Polish lands before the Holocaust; Jewish culture and religion as an object of memory and nostalgia; prints and reprints of sources (memoirs and accounts from the ghetto, but also of Jewish writers or philosophers); the politics of the State of Israel; the relationship of Christianity and Judaism (especially in the Catholic press with a more open-minded inclination: *Tygodnik Powszechny*, *Znak*, *Więź*. Here a great deal of space is devoted to the teachings of John Paul II and his statements on Judaism and Jewish history, so many articles on “Jewish topics” turn out to be reports on papal pilgrimages). Toward the end of the 1980s, there are reportages about Jews visiting Poland years later. These are interesting texts, describing specific individuals and their wartime fate from the post-war perspective (most often life in Israel, but not only that), but I do not analyze them in this article, because they cannot be counted as narratives about “Poles rescuing Jews”. A separate category in Polish journalism touching on Jewish topics are texts devoted to Janusz Korczak, both his thoughts and pedagogical activities, as well as his wartime plight and his “heroic” death in Treblinka along with his wards.

These texts may be grouped around the moments of their publication: above all around the anniversaries of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (especially in 1983 and 1988), in 1978 – Janusz Korczak’s Year, and in “incendiary moments”, when for one reason or

another the subject of Polish-Jewish relations returned: for example in late 1982 and early 1983 when Maksymilian Kolbe was canonized; in 1985 following Claude Lanzman's film *Shoah*; in 1987 as a debate precipitated by the publication of Jan Błoński's essay "Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto" [The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto] in *Tygodnik Powszechny* (Błoński, 1987). Hence, for example, the bibliography of the *Więź* monthly for the years 1973–1990, made according to such broad criteria, renders 145 titles; the bibliography of *Polityka* over 100; the bibliographies of *Tygodnik Powszechny* and *Znak* render a few tens each, although these focus primarily on religious matters. In the licensed Catholic press (*Słowo Powszechne*, *Ład*) and in the press with a more conservative slant and associated with church centers (and not, as in the case of *Tygodnik Powszechny* and *Więź*, with the lay community), such as *Niedziela*, *Gość Niedzielny* (published since before the war), *Mysł społeczna* (a weekly published in 1965–89 by the Main Board of the "Caritas" Association of Catholics), Jewish themes almost always appear in the context of aid given to Jews by Poles, hence a certain over-representation of this press in my article. I also decided to include in the analysis the Polish-language pages of the Jewish weekly *Fołks-Sztyme* from the 1980s, because of the advertisements published there by Poles searching for people of Jewish background.

Defensiveness and intervention, or the significance of context

Even the initial query proved that despite the considerable number of newspaper articles devoted to "Jewish topics": issues related to the extermination of Jews in the Polish lands, their memory or their pre-war history, it is extremely difficult, to encounter specific people, specific Jews, between the pages of these texts. This drastically diminishes the body of the analyzed articles, and at the same time complicates the research topic, for this persistent absence of Jews in the stories of their rescuing demands characterization and description. In analyzing stories in which specific Jews do appear, I will cite texts that stand out in some way as exceptions to the rule. What turns out to be more interesting than the static (and, as it turned out, hard to grasp) "image" or "picture" are the dynamic ways of "telling" and in particular this almost intangible, flickering, ephemeral presence of Jews in stories about Poles helping them.

A research field delineated in this way would suggest focusing on the perspective of micro-history and a close reading of specific texts. Many of the articles I have analyzed have a peculiar hybrid character: they combine a synthetic description of the general situation in which Jews and Poles found themselves under the German occupation (most often with a special focus on the dangers faced by Poles providing aid to Jews) with a detailed account of cases of individual or group assistance (for example, the nuns of a particular congregation or the inhabitants of a particular village). Thus,

against the background of a broad panorama, one perceives a certain “densification”, accumulation and multiplicity of cases of Poles rescuing Jews. A separate group is made up of stories of individual rescuers (Stanisław Wiśniewski, Jan Dobraczyński, Jadwiga Piotrowska) or stories about them (e.g. Sister Matylda Getter), which focus on a certain section of the aid activity. What they have in common is that they almost always appear as interventions.

My task is not at all to examine the Polish discourse on saving Jews, nor is it to study memory of the Holocaust. These topics have already been taken up by prominent scholars and researchers, and recent years in particular have yielded a crop of excellent publications on the subject.⁹ However, it is impossible to analyze the story of Polish aid to Jews without the context of this discourse, so I want to isolate its most important element. The dominant way of telling the story of Polish-Jewish relations during the war is called the “paradigm of Polish innocence” (Forecki, 2010, pp. 334–355). This paradigm has in recent years become the prevailing line of historical policy practiced by state cultural institutions and research centers, but its basic components have been present in the discourse almost since the end of the war. I would call the heroic-hysterical defence of Polish innocence a “defensive-interventionist” discourse (the term “defensive-defiant” would also be adequate), by which I mean that any Polish statement about Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust is always situated in the context of spoken or assumed accusations against Poles: accusations of indifference; of inadequate assistance to their Jewish fellow citizens and neighbours; of secretly or openly enjoying the fate that the Nazis inflicted on the Jews; of complicity in the murder and making the extermination of Jews on Polish territory such a successful enterprise.

It also means that stories about Polish aid to Jews surface at moments of heightened danger (or rather a sense of danger), on the occasion of some unflattering statement about Poles, whether from politicians, writers, filmmakers or researchers. Accusations, in turn, can come and have come (at least from the perspective of the “defenders of Poland’s good name”) from everywhere: from ungrateful survivors, from Israel (which allegedly foments hatred of Poles), from American Jews (who themselves remained indifferent to the Holocaust), from “Western public opinion”, from university and research centers steeped in the “pedagogy of shame” and “propagating the religion of the Holocaust” (according to Paweł Lisicki in 2018; Lisicki, 2018) or from “politicians with academic titles and pseudo-intellectuals” (this from Michał Głowiński’s *Marcowe gadanie*; Głowiński, 1991).

This defensiveness resulted in the hammering out of a set of bullet-proof arguments, rehearsed over the years not only in public discussions, but also in the works of historians; school textbooks; educational materials; during state ceremonies; celebra-

9 See: Forecki (2010); Kowalska-Leder et al. (2017); Niziołek (2013); Nowicka-Franczak (2017); Żukowski (2018). For more on the discourse following Jan T. Gross’ *Sąsiedzi*, see: Dobrosielski (2017a); Forecki (2018). For more about the discourse of liberal elites and the not always recognized antisemitic clichés in commemorating the victims of the Holocaust: Janicka & Żukowski (2016); on *Sprawiedliwi*: Kowalska-Leder (2019).

tions of subsequent anniversaries, etc. They were synthetically presented by Jan Błoński in his famous 1987 essay “Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto” in a reconstruction of an imaginary, typical conversation on Polish antisemitism with someone “from abroad”. Błoński wrote that in the “fictitious Pole” one detects the fear

that he might be counted among the helpers of death. It is so strong that we do everything possible not to let it out or to dismiss it. We read or listen to discussions on the subject of Polish-Jewish past and if some event, some fact which puts us in a less-than-advantageous light, emerges, we try our hardest to minimize it, to explain it away and make it seem insignificant. (Błoński, 1987)

Błoński gives this paranoid fear a moral, almost metaphysical dimension (by juxtaposing it with Czesław Miłosz’s poem about a Christian looking at a burning and destroyed ghetto), but this fear can, of course, have other grounds and vectors, primarily political, whether liberal (fear of “what they will think in the West”, i.e. of exclusion from the “civilized” community) or national (fear of disturbing the image of Poles as heroes and innocent victims that is the pillar of the collective self-stereotype and the community constructed around it)¹⁰. But it is not so much the sources of this fear that interest me here, but rather its pervasiveness, its indispensability in almost all stories about rescuing Jews, in which the need to refute real or imagined accusations becomes a ritual preamble or an appellative conclusion, and the context of the constant threat of being accused of “being counted among the helpers of death” becomes an essential condition for their existence. The defensive intention is expressed openly, although of course those who “suggest”, “accuse”, “vilify” or “raise voices” are identified and named in various ways.

In April 1968, Irena Szubówna starts her article *Pomoc duchowieństwa dla ludności żydowskiej w latach 1939–1945* [Aid of the Clergy to the Jewish People in the Years 1939–1945] in a richly illustrated Catholic weekly *Myśl Społeczna*, whose design would be more appropriate for a lifestyle magazine, with the following words:

Zionist magazines have for a long time been publishing articles slandering Poles and obscuring the truth about the heroic attitude of the Polish society, who risked their lives to help the Jewish people during the Nazi occupation [...]

This is in the year 1968, April, so the enemy is clearly defined (although it is not entirely clear what those ‘Zionist magazines’ might be, who publishes them, and where. West Germany? Israel?), and its political intentions are explicit:

The anti-Polish campaign in Zionist magazines intensified after the condemnation of Israel’s lawless act of aggression against Arab countries. It is painful to note that among the slan-

10 For more on the contemporary discourse on *Sprawiedliwi*, see: Haska, 2014 and the chapter entitled *Rzeczpospolita Sprawiedliwych* (Republic of the Righteous) in: Forecki, 2018. A very insightful analysis of the role of “righteous families” in recent historical politics is carried out by A. Podbielska (2019b) in her article “Święta rodzina z Markowej: kult Ulmów i polityka historyczna” [The Holy Family of Markowa: The Cult of the Ulmas and Historical Politics], while Justyna Kowalska-Leder (2022) analyzes the assumptions and implementation of the Pilecki Institute’s program *Called by Name*.

derers were even those who saved their lives from the Nazi Holocaust only thanks to the attitude of the Polish society. (Szubówna, 1968, pp. 4–5)

There is no point in giving too many examples from the March propaganda, they are numerous and well-documented; it would perhaps be more interesting to shed light on the more subtle ways in which the defensive-interventionist strategy functioned, even in magazines that are considered not to have joined the antisemitic campaign.

In the liberal weekly *Polityka* in its issue of 20 April 1968, the young but already established reporter Hanna Krall publishes a text entitled “Gra o moje życie” [Game for My Life] (Krall, 1968). The article is “good” in terms of journalistic workmanship, it clearly showcases the author’s characteristic style, which makes it a refined propaganda tool, precisely because of the ostensible authenticity and honesty. “Ostensible” because Krall is placed here in the role of the “perfect subtenant”, who is to “attest to the idealized self-image of the tenant” (Janicka & Tokarska-Bakir, 2013, p. 2), of a grateful Jewish woman who conscientiously enumerates the Poles involved in the game for her life, for her survival. In 1990, and thus from a safe distance in time, Jerzy Urban cynically called this, “a kind of Jewish obligatory supply”, designed to distinguish “good, loyal Jews” from “Zionists”. Urban himself, however, did not shirk such an “obligatory supply” at the time either (more on that in a moment), although he played up his Jewish identity and subtenant position in a completely different way, demonstratively nonchalantly¹¹.

However, it is possible to read the text in spite of the political circumstances that forced its creation, to decipher the context that is not allowed to be spoken about from the insinuations, from the subtenant’s takeover of the figures of discourse. Krall opts for the bookkeeping of rescuers, counting the Poles in the same way they count the saved Jews. “In the game for my life the stake was the life of 45 people”, she concludes. At the same time, while listing successive names and successive places of residence – there are ten in total – she doesn’t actually mention the reasons for the relocations, she only repeats “and later.... and later...”

And later there was the small, humble apartment of Ms. Podhorska [...] And later there was a short-term hiding place at Mr. Nowak’s [...] And later there was an elegant apartment with a front room and servants’ quarters [...] And later there was the Czapski family. (Krall, 1968)

11 In a further part of the entry on Krall in his *Alfabet Urbana* [Urban’s Alphabet], he recalls the story of his own hiding. He claims that he survived the war with his parents in the village of Budzanów, thanks to Aryan documents. It wasn’t until after the war, when it came out that the Urban family was Jewish, that “various people from Budzanów came to my parents and me, asking for all kinds of help for having hidden us. When I responded that memory fails them, that no one had hidden us and that we owe nothing to anyone, they would become quite indignant: they had put their lives at risk for us, and look how ungrateful we are! [...] One of them thus responded to my explanations that no one had hidden us: but we suspected you were jews [sic – KS] and yet we didn’t denounce you to the Germans” (Urban, 1990, pp. 92–93). In the same publication, in the entry on Daniel Passent, Urban ironically stated that he has an odd claustrophobia which he developed during the occupation. “As a child he was a Jewish child and spent the occupation in a closet, because the Nazis wanted to kill Passent. Strange, but it left some mark on him. In 1968 I could tell he was afraid, even though he was able to understand there was nothing to fear. He forces his daughter to play tennis all the time, as if thinking that closed spaces are a source of misery and open ones of blessing, although it is clearly the other way around” (Urban, 1990, p. 144). The attitude of the *Polityka* journalists to their Jewish background and their strategies for playing out this identity would be a topic for a separate, very interesting story.

What lies beneath those ellipses? Why did Krall have to move so many times if the entire Polish society, regardless of their beliefs, helped Jews in solidarity? The answers to these questions were clear to anyone who knew the reality of the occupation (especially from the perspective of a person in hiding). As Tomasz Żukowski put it:

The information about the fate and experience of the discriminated is vague, it exists only as allusions, which have yet to be deciphered. Finding and understanding these traces is not at all easy, and their recognition does not impose itself as one of the important interpretations of the text. This is because allusions to discrimination appear against the background of the dominant narrative with strong meanings, which are clear and legible and form a well-known entirety. (Żukowski, 1987)

From the perspective of the dominant narrative, even from the perspective of a researcher sympathetic to the discriminated group and ready to empathize with it, Krall's text appears precisely as a grim repayment of a subtenant's debt at a time when the majority needs an exemplary "good subtenant". But one can also, years later, read the text as one that, in the words of Elżbieta Janicka and Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, describes "a socio-cultural obviousness, or the invisibility of what is on the very surface and visible to the naked eye" (Janicka & Tokarska-Bakir, 2013, p. 2).

Krall's article, however, does not exhaust the "March quota" in *Polityka*; on the contrary, it has a very elaborate envelope. None of the articles published at the time can be called directly antisemitic; moreover, their authors are of Jewish origin (Daniel Passent, Adam Rutkowski, Jerzy Urban), but they form a specific context for Krall's story, and at the same time a corpus of texts situated at the liberal pole of discourse, without challenging its rules. Jerzy Urban recalls his visit to Israel in 1956 as "the only post-war encounter with extremist racism" (Urban, 1968, p. 8), the prominent historian Adam Rutkowski (1968a, 1968b, 1968c) publishes an extensive three-part historical analysis in which he discusses in detail the forms of Polish aid to the Jewish people, its conditions and consequences¹². This focus on detail creates the impression of a plethora of the cases involving help, while relegating the collective "non-help" to the background. Daniel Passent belligerently argues with Abram Solomon, chairman of the New York Ghetto Uprising Anniversary Commemoration Committee, who stated that "it is tragically deceitful to say that Poles stood up for Jews and were ready to pay with their lives for the help they provided"; with a West German journalist and an American congressman "slandering Poland" (Pass, 1968, p. 2). Stefan Kozicki reviews Wacław Poterański's book¹³, pleased that it provides arguments in the "ongoing polemic against the theses of propaganda from centers hostile to socialist Poland" (Kozicki, 1968, p. 11). And then there are the letters to the editor sent in by indignant readers. "How can we be so

12 Soon after Rutkowski emigrated to France.

13 Where, as Michael Steinlauf calculated, in the description of the Ghetto Uprising three times more space is devoted to the aid actions of the Polish underground than to the Jewish struggle. This observation is quoted from: Podbielska, 2019a, p. 369.

atrociously accused today?” – asks M. Pietraszewska from Lublin – “Where is the conscience of those people who survived thanks to our help?”¹⁴

The need to intervene as an impulse and reason to write about Poles saving Jews is by no means characteristic only of March propaganda. Efforts to “de-falsify history” must never cease. On the 40th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, Tadeusz Swirtun¹⁵, a journalist for the *Słowo Powszechne* (the daily that launched the antisemitic press campaign in 1968¹⁶), talks to Dr. Wacław Zajączkowski from the USA, whose activities as Secretary General of the Catholic Interethnic Council are known and appreciated “especially in Washington”, and who after a period of professional work at, among others, Columbia University, Harvard and the Catholic University of America, has been working on the issue of “the shared fate of Poles and Jews during the Nazi Holocaust”¹⁷.

What inspired Zajączkowski to tackle the subject was the “dissemination by some circles of a hurtful opinion about the attitude of Poles toward Jews”. Thus, he organized two exhibitions in Washington to prove that “Jews were not alone. Thousands of Poles, risking their own lives, helped the Jewish population to survive the Holocaust”. Doctor Zajączkowski also explains the origin of the hurtful stereotypes about Poles. It is all down to Israel, as children of the survivors “could not believe that their parents did not defend themselves against being murdered”. Thus, it was convenient to come up with a convincing tale about the hostility of the Poles, which made it impossible to escape

14 More follows: “[...] Our parents and we knew what we were risking; we knew Frank’s decree, which imposed the death penalty for the slightest help given to Jews. In these specters clad in striped uniforms, we saw wretched people who had to be helped to the best of our ability by at least providing a piece of bread” („Do studentów Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego”, 1968).

15 He remains active to this day on Twitter, where he describes himself as a “Pensioner, Catholic, lunatic and a mohair beret” (<https://twitter.com/swited>; Tadeusz Swirtun, b.d.).

16 *Słowo Powszechne* was the only Catholic daily newspaper with national coverage in socialist countries. It was an organ of the PAX Association (the so-called “licensed Catholics”), founded by Bolesław Piasecki, who before the war was the leader and ideologist of the National Radical Movement “Falanga”, a de facto fascist formation, whose ideological pillars were antisemitism, anti-communism, anti-democratism, nationalism, and a peculiar kind of anti-capitalism. The National Radical Camp “Falanga” (ONR “Falanga”) was an illegal group engaged in terrorist activities, with its paramilitary annex mainly engaged in attacking Jewish stores and apartments. Piasecki’s movement was also responsible for opening fire on participants in a May Day demonstration organized by the Bund; a pogrom in the town of Przytyk (throwing firebombs at Jewish homes and cutting telephone wires to prevent a call to the fire department); a bombing at the headquarters of the Polish Teachers’ Union and many other acts of terror. For more on this, see: Lipski (2015); Rudnicki (2018).

The article “Do studentów Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego” [To the Students of the University of Warsaw], published on 11 March 1968 in *Słowo Powszechne* is deemed the start of the antisemitic press campaign.

17 It is difficult to find more information about Dr. Wacław Zajączkowski other than that in 1988 the St. Maximilian Kolbe Foundation published his two-volume story about the rescue of Jews by Polish Catholics (and the veil of silence that shrouded their heroic work, courtesy of Jewish ingratitude), under the telling title *Martyrs of Charity* (Zajączkowski, 1988–1989). Reviews posted on amazon.com (from 2016) prove that the book is still an eye-opener for Americans (see <https://www.amazon.com/Martyrs-Charity-Waclaw-Zajaczkowski/dp/0945281005>; „*Martyrs of charity*” by Wacław Zajaczkowski, b.d.), while the Google Books website suggests as “similar books” *The Forgotten Holocaust: The Poles Under German Occupation* by Richard C. Lukas (1986) and *Those who Helped: Polish Rescuers of Jews During The Holocaust* by Ryszard Walczak (1993), which lists names and biographical notes on four hundred and fifty Poles killed for helping Jews. Interestingly, *Martyrs of Charity* is the source of a story about an altruistic deed by Jan Maletka, who had been allegedly shot dead by Germans for giving water to Jews stuck in wagons at the Treblinka station. Zajączkowski based this information on a conversation with Remigiusz Pawłowicz from 1983, that is over forty years after Maletka’s death. In 2021, the Pilecki Institute put up a monument to Maletka at the station in Treblinka under the “Called by Name” program, which was met with vehement criticism (see: Leszczyński, 2021).

from the ghetto. This is a creative expansion of the myth of passive Jews, meekly going to their deaths “like sheep to the slaughter”, a cliché that dates back to the occupation and is cited on the occasion of every antisemitic upsurge. Zajączkowski adds another cliché: “most of them [Jews] did not want to fight and remained passive, for example in Vilnius...” – and here follows a story of how Judenrat members denounced Yitzhak Wittenberg, who wanted to fight, to the Gestapo¹⁸. Zajączkowski goes on to tell the story of Father Kolbe’s rescue of Jews at Niepokalanów, and that the fact of his canonization caused “great discontent among the Jews”, because the world “then learned on a grand scale that Poles, not just Jews, were being murdered at Auschwitz”¹⁹. For the celebration of the upcoming 40th anniversary of the uprising (the interview was conducted before 19 April), Zajączkowski designed a special illuminated map “showing the military situation of the Ghetto [capital letter used in the original], where and what battles took place, taking into account what was done by the Home Army and the People’s Guard in order to demonstrate the real picture of the struggle and brotherhood that took place”. It’s hard to repress bitter amusement at the vision of a Polish-American doctor enthusiastically orating about an illuminated map, but isn’t this infantile delight at his own idea of popularizing knowledge about the heroism of Poles (interaction!) close to contemporary practices of “narrative security”, in which, after all, the point is to make the truth about the decent behaviour of the Polish nation accessible and attractive? The stakes are, after all, considerable:

This is of such great importance, because we are aware of the enormous wrongs that are being done to us by falsifying history, wrongs that are not only moral but also have their indirect bearing in economic and political relations, in the anti-Polish propaganda that has intensified, especially recently. [...] Jews have no reason whatsoever to trample Poland. (Swir-tun & Zajączkowski, 1983)

The narrative security machine was not invented in 2018²⁰. The interview with Zajączkowski concludes a series of anniversary publications published in the *Słowo*

18 In fact, Yitzhak Wittenberg surrendered himself to the Germans voluntarily, after they issued an ultimatum to the Vilnius Judenrat. The figure of the Judenrats as organs of collaboration with the Germans (along with the Jewish police), intended to illustrate the lack of solidarity and cowardice of Jews (who sought even the most humiliating and immoral forms of rescue) appears already in the aforementioned film by Kidawa and Gontarz, although it is worth mentioning that the ghetto residents had been admonished for being too submissive to German decrees already by the underground press. The motif of Jewish collaboration was recently taken up and pushed to the limits of absurdity by Ewa Kurek (2014) in her book *Poza granicą solidarności. Stosunki polsko-żydowskie 1939–1945* [Beyond the Boundary of Solidarity: Polish-Jewish Relations 1939–1945]. Her publication, however, is just one example of the expression of a persisting Holocaust stereotype.

19 In reality, on the occasion of the canonization of Maximilian Kolbe, the antisemitic content in the *Mały Dziennik* he edited in the interwar period was recalled (and, for the younger generation, revealed), which triggered a discussion also in Poland, in the official press. Jerzy Urban called the content of the magazines edited by Kolbe “filth”, which Catholic circles – in 1983! – took as an “offense of religious feelings”. The Polish Catholic Social Association, registered for the occasion, sent an open letter to then-Prime Minister Wojciech Jaruzelski, demanding Urban’s resignation from the function of government spokesman. Deputy Prime Minister and at the same time editor-in-chief of *Polityka* Mieczysław Rakowski found the Catholics’ claims unjustified, and Urban’s statement justified. *Polityka* then published a selection of antisemitic excerpts from *Mały Dziennik: Polityka*, 1983, no. 17, p. 3.

20 The narrative security machine, or MaBeNa, is Andrzej Zybertowicz’s idea for monitoring and actively transforming Poland’s image in the world. As Paweł Kowal explained: “MaBeNa is intended to give resonance to

Powszechnie in April 1983. In issue no. 74, we find information about the 40th anniversary of the ghetto uprising, while in issue no. 76 there is a lengthy article by Father Franciszek Stopniak (1983) entitled “Duchowieństwo polskie wobec Żydów w okresie II wojny światowej” [The Polish Clergy and Jews in the Period of World War II], which is a peculiar (and actually quite bizarre) rewriting of the entire history of Polish help to Jews as Catholics’ help to Jews, attributing most of the credit to the clergy and the Church while miraculously multiplying the credit of Poles in general, since “the mere silence of a Pole about a Jew in hiding counted for much”²¹. The same issue also contains information about two exhibitions devoted to the “culture and martyrdom of the Jews”, at the National Museum and the Jewish Historical Institute, while issue no. 77 features an interview with Jadwiga Piotrowska, to which I will return. Although the interview with Zajączkowski was conducted before the anniversary celebrations, the decision to make it something of a summary of the celebrations seems characteristic.

Occasionally, insufficiently satisfactory Polish writings also require intervention. In an interview with the Catholic weekly *Ład*, published since 1981, Jan Dobraczyński, a writer associated with the PAX milieu and during the occupation a social activist involved in helping Jewish children, said:

The book *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej* [This One is From My Homeland] is biased and strangely glosses over the participation of Catholics in the rescue of Jews. In this respect, it limits itself to a few fairly well-known examples, such as the activities of Father Godlewski, Mosdorf²² or mine. Meanwhile, it must be said that the entire Catholic society [emphasis added – KS]

our thinking about our own history to the whole world. For example: one can argue about how many Poles denounced Jews during World War II, and debate how many went on the merry-go-round instead of carrying bread to the ghetto, and why this happened. Opinions on this will be divided. MaBeNa’s task, then, is to show first and foremost those who were exemplary, and to make it clear to everyone that in terms of the law – crucial for a multi-ethnic state such as the Second Republic – Poland had passed the test. The Polish legal authorities did not lend their cooperation to Hitler and remained 100 percent on the side of the persecuted Jews” (Kowal, 2018). As an aside, it is worth noting how the right-wing circles associated with historical politics have appropriated the term “narrative” (derived from the postmodern discourse, of which they are wary) and have begun to treat it as a useful tool in the battle for memory, although it can also be noted that today “narrative” is what is called “propaganda” in reference to the communist past.

- 21 This inflation of the merits of the clergy for helping Jews is carried out by pointing out clergymen who had a connection with organizations that had a connection with organizations that rescued Jews (priests Edmund Krauze, Franciszek Pauliński, Jan Zieja as activists of the Front for the Rebirth of Poland associated with “Żegota”). It is then argued that, in fact, without the Church, there would have been no rescuing, because priests appealed to the “Christian dictates of conscience” in the action of finding apartments, they “influenced the attitude of the general population toward the persecuted Jews”. Moreover, of course, there is an emphasis on the participation of the clergy in hiding Jewish children in religious congregations and issuing false birth certificates, which is a form of direct and well-documented assistance, but it should be remembered that before the war there were virtually no civil birth certificates in Poland. Thus, church documents were the only ones that could confirm someone’s non-Jewishness, and religious communities had a monopoly on birth registration (atheism was not legally recognized) (Stopniak, 1983). As a commentary on the author’s argument that “the mere silence of a Pole about a Jew in hiding counted for much”, one can quote the sarcastic punchline of Jerzy Urban’s story, cited above, about the demands of the residents of Budzanów, where he stayed with his parents during the war, to provide them with “all kinds of help” in exchange for the village having hidden them, or even if it hadn’t hidden them, it hadn’t turned them over to the Germans. “There are various notions of incurring debts of gratitude, as you can see”, Urban quips, “and at this point I thank all those who did not run me over, even though they passed right next to me with their car” (Urban, 1990, p. 93).
- 22 Alicja Podbielska (2019a) also writes about the use of Mosdorf’s figure as an exemplary “antisemite rescuer” intended to serve as *pars pro toto* of Polish attitudes toward Jews during the occupation (i.e., helping them regardless of ideological and political beliefs and even regardless of their pre-war antisemitism).

keenly participated in this action, regardless of their sympathies or antipathies toward Jews. („Ratował kto mógł: Rozmowa z Janem Dobraczyńskim”, 1983, s. 5)

At the end of the brief conversation, Dobraczyński notes that Jews have been drawn to Poland over the centuries because they knew that in Poland they would not be persecuted and would be able to enjoy a great deal of autonomy. “This is the truth about the «Polish antisemitism» proclaimed in the West”, he says. To the interviewer’s remark that it was this alleged antisemitism of Poles that supposedly convinced Hitler to choose Poland as the site of the Holocaust, Dobraczyński responds by quoting the concept of... Jędrzej Giertych, who in his book *In Defence of My Country* “interestingly and convincingly” writes about the idea of creating a “Jewish reserve” on the border of the General Government, which was to be the object of a political bidding war. “In view of the fact that the bidding failed and the United States acted against the Germans, the «reserve» turned into a place of concentration of Jews destined for extermination” („Ratował kto mógł: Rozmowa z Janem Dobraczyńskim”, 1983, s. 5).

The compulsion to pre-emptively defend oneself and to take a stance against “accusations” is so strong that it sometimes leads to internal contradictions within a single statement, which seems particularly interesting from the point of view of discourse analysis. On 17 April 1985, Helena Balicka-Kozłowska²³ and posthumously her parents, Jadwiga and Zygmunt Balicki, were awarded the Righteous Among the Nations medals. During the ceremony, she spoke about the motives for her family’s involvement in the rescue activities and about what those activities consisted of. She spoke of the socialist tradition in which she was raised, the tradition of tolerance, freedom for all, social justice and helping others, and the fact that many Jews had been friends of her family “since time immemorial”, although they were assimilated and Polonized. Helena Balicka-Kozłowska’s speech is marked by a high degree of reflection and self-reflection: she realizes that before the war she had considered Jewish society to be “poor, backward and subject to religious superstition” and thought that the only way of emancipation for them was Europeanization, and therefore – Polonization. But in 1942, something happened that opened her eyes: she received a note from her friend Sara Biderman (who later became a fighter in the Jewish Combat Organization²⁴): “Somehow I am still

23 Helena Balicka-Kozłowska (1920–2004) – Polish sociologist, Righteous Among the Nations, participant in the Warsaw Uprising. Many Jewish friends hid in her family home during the war, including Hanka Szapiro (Sawicka), who stayed there overnight, and after the suppression of the Ghetto Uprising, Jewish Combat Organization fighter Sara Biderman. She published two memoirs: *Mur miał dwie strony* [The Wall Had Two Sides] (Balicka-Kozłowska, 1958) and *Hanka: Wspomnienia o Hance Szapiro-Sawickiej* [Hanka: My Memoirs of Hanka Szapiro-Sawicka] (Balicka-Kozłowska, 1961). She also included her reflections on Polish aid to the Jews in the article *Kto ratował, kogo ratowano* [Who Rescued, Who Was Rescued] (Balicka-Kozłowska, 1988), in which she ponders on why so few Jews were saved.

24 Sara Biderman (1920 or 1923–1972), who came from a poor, traditional Jewish family, met Helena Balicka during her architecture entry exams, before the war. She lived in the ghetto, worked on the Haluk farm estate (staying overnight in barracks in Czerniaków), then was taken back to the ghetto, where she took part in the uprising. Wounded, she reached the Balicki family home, after the fall of the uprising she was a liaison officer between the Jewish Combat Organization and the People’s Army, injured once again she underwent surgery thanks to Helena’s determination. During the Warsaw Uprising she fought with the 3rd Battalion of the People’s Army, she met Balicka in the Old Town. After the fall of the uprising, she was deported to Germany for

alive. If you want to see me, come one day at eight o'clock, Czerniaków estate behind Plac Bernardyński”.

I thought that Sara and her so-called unit go there to work, and that for the night they herded them back into the ghetto”, Balicka reported in her speech, “However, to my great amazement I found that the Jews live there on the spot in barracks near the road and the gate is open. Two months after the great liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto they are staying at an unguarded place and not escaping! Sara explained it to me like this: «Some of us have bad looks, others a terrible accent, we have neither money nor addresses and the partisans are very far away; we can't get there without help from the outside».

It was only then that I really understood what I had theoretically known for a long time: that not only the wall, barbed wire and armed guards, but also the separation of the Jews from Polish society and the indifference of certain circles of Poles contribute considerably to the situation of the Jews. („Sprawiedliwy wśród narodów świata”, 1985, s. 11)

The aforementioned circles are “certain circles”, and the contribution is “considerable”, and thus this utterance about Polish indifference is fairly guarded: it was not the dominant attitude in the society, only in “certain circles”; it was not the chief factor that enabled or at least facilitated the success of German extermination, it only “contributed considerably” to the situation of the Jews. Nevertheless, Balicka expressed something that allows a careful reader of all these accounts to pose this question: why didn't the Jews from barracks in Czerniaków look for shelter with all those Catholics who were so eager to help them, “regardless of their sympathies or antipathies”, as Dobraczyński stated? The rules of discourse, however, are such that any objections to Polish victimhood must be veiled in euphemisms, with space left for conjecture for those familiar with the context, accompanied by mitigating adjectives (“certain circles”, “contribute considerably”), and above all, accompanied with the necessary intervention and defensive clause to ward off even unspoken attacks and accusations. A clause is, according to the PWN Dictionary of Polish Language, “a stipulation or condition in a contract, agreement, treaty, etc.”. Assertions of Polish self-sacrifice with regard to the Jews and of the dignified attitude of the majority of society, relegating antisemitic and collaborative behaviour to the periphery and attributing it to individuals defined differently from Poles (and so: individuals, social miscreants, criminals and generally greedy and unworthy people) is a necessary condition in a treaty that is unwritten but well-known to all who speak out, on what is admissible to say about Poles in the face of the Holocaust. A clause is also “the final section of a line with a fixed structure determined by the rules of a given system of versification” or “in ancient rhetoric: the ending of a sentence or part of a sentence with a specific arrangement of long and short syllables”²⁵, which, indicating the rhetorical nature of such phrases, can mean both their solemnity and

labour. After the war, following a short stay at a kibbutz in Łódź, she emigrated to Palestine and lived at the Lohamei HaGeta'ot (Ghetto Fighters') kibbutz.

25 All three definitions from the PWN Dictionary of Polish Language, <https://sjp.pwn.pl/slowniki/klauzula.html> („Klauzula”, b.d.).

routinization, that is, uttering them without reflection or against one's own experiences or beliefs.

"I thank you for the decoration", Balicka concludes, "which I value particularly highly, and which I do not think I deserve, because other decorated people did much more by rescuing people completely unknown to them, with bad looks and accents, that is, they took much greater risks than our family [...] At the same time, I implore you earnestly not to allow the propagation of bad opinions about all Poles on the basis of the despicable acts committed by individual people. („Sprawiedliwy wśród narodów świata", 1985, s. 11)

The need to intervene is also what drives rescuers to submit their personal testimonies on specific cases to the press. At this point it is worth posing the question: who actually is the addressee of these fervent pre-emptive defenses and impassioned denials, of this outrage at the vilification of Poles and their classification as "helpers of death"? Is it the Poles themselves who need to keep retelling this idealized and heartening version of history to themselves? Is it international public opinion, inclined to believe the more audible Jewish voices, or perhaps the Jews who spread negative opinions about Poles and remain unwilling to honour Polish sacrifice? All the answers are probably correct, and the second group is linked – obviously in the minds of the senders of the messages – to the third. That's why I decided to include in the query the Polish-language pages of the *Folks-Sztyme* weekly, which in the 1980s published numerous accounts of Poles helping Jews during the war²⁶.

26 *Folks Sztyme*, published first as an organ of the Polish Workers' Party (PPR), then of the Social and Cultural Association of Jews in Poland (TSKŻ), financially dependent on the state budget and having the ambition and task of being the most important press organ of the Jewish people in Poland, was in a very uncomfortable position for almost the entire period of its existence. Created and managed by ideological communists, it was, like many institutions of Jewish life, treated instrumentally by the party authorities. Leaving aside the dramatic tribulations of the weekly during the March events, in the 1970s and 1980s its editors also had to maneuver between writing about Jewish problems (and thus the problem of antisemitism) and serving as an "alibi" for state propaganda, especially against foreign Jewish circles. A suggestive expression of this embroilment can be found in the words of editor-in-chief Samuel Tenenblatt, spoken in 1981 at a meeting with head of the Office of Religious Affairs Jerzy Kuberski: "in shaping our newspaper we have always been and will continue to be guided by one goal: fidelity to the best traditions of Polish Jewry, that is, to bind one's fate – for better or worse – to the fate of the Polish nation; that is, to defend the good name of the Polish Jew, which is tantamount to promoting and strengthening the good name of the Polish nation, of which we have always been and are an integral part" ("Rozmowa z Ministrem", 1982, p. 12, emphasis added – KS). Applying the categories of Krall, used by Janicka and Tokarska-Bakir, it could be said that *Folks-Sztyme* was a subtenants' magazine. During the "Solidarity Carnival", Tenenblatt and the editorial staff of *Folks-Sztyme* felt threatened by the nationalist rhetoric of the "Grunwald" National Union and applied to the leadership of the Polish United Workers' Party to address this issue, but to no avail. Moreover, fearing that Tenenblatt would "exaggerate the danger of resurgence of antisemitism in the People's Republic of Poland" during the deliberations of the European Section of the World Jewish Congress in Brussels, the party leadership gave a negative opinion on sending him to Belgium. At the same time, along with the materials disseminated by members of "Grunwald", who were (rightly) perceived by Polish Jews as the heirs of Moczar, antisemitic content appeared in the underground press. And it is during this period that stories by Poles about helping Jews during the occupation begin to appear in the pages of the Polish section of the weekly, presented as letters to the editor from helpers wishing either to make contact with survivors or to testify to their own and Polish society's generosity. These stories, over time, developed into an irregular series *Kto ratuje jedno życie – ratuje cały świat* [Who Saves One Life Saves the Whole World], to which I will return later on. *Folks-Sztyme* has not yet had a monograph devoted to it. However, in the collective volume *Studia z dziejów trójjęzycznej prasy żydowskiej na ziemiach polskich (XIX–XX w.)* [Studies on the History of Trilingual Jewish Press in the Polish Territories (19th–20th Centuries)], edited by Joanna Nalewajko-Kulikow, Grzegorz Bąbiak and Alina Cieślíkowa there is an article by Grzegorz Berendt entitled „*Folks Sztyme*” – *instrument oddziaływania na Żydów w Polsce i za granicą (1946–1991)* [*Folks Sztyme* – An Instrument for Influencing Jews in Poland and Abroad (1946–1991)] (Berendt, 2012). It focuses more on the issues of the composition of the editorial board, issues of circulation distribution and the political

In the summer of 1985 Władysław Pawełek writes (to the editor? To the readers of *Folks-Sztyme*?):

I would like to vehemently deny that Poles supported, or even participated, as some suggest, in the extermination of Jews. The Polish nation, as history indicates, has been an overwhelmingly Catholic nation, but also religiously and racially tolerant, not antisemitic. [...] This will not be obscured by the pre-war, isolated excesses of a few irresponsible individuals and organizations. (Pawełek, 1985)

Pawełek writes of Stefan Knoblauch, a Jewish boy hidden by his family (this was the name given to the boy by the Polish family: “I don’t remember his Jewish name”, admits Pawełek). He combines this story with an appeal for help in locating Stefan and his family and for promulgating the good name of Poles in the world:

Maybe my story will reach them [the Knoblauchs] and they will recall these moments and facts and bear witness to the truth. I cordially invite them to Łódź [exact address], where I live. At least I ask that they make contact. Given the hindsight of many years, in light of this terrible extermination and some tiny fraction of happiness in it, it is important for the world to know that Poles rescued Jews to the best of their abilities in those circumstances, in the name of humanity and justice. (Pawełek, 1985)

Far be it from me to attribute conscious antisemitic intentions or chauvinistic fervor to the authors of such statements. They may have been, especially as persons who had established personal relationships with the rescued, genuinely concerned and saddened by the fact that Poles in general were accused of resentment and hostility toward Jews during the war. Perhaps they themselves did not recognize such a situation, perhaps they repressed it, perhaps they were shaped by ethics and rhetoric commanding them to look for the good in the enormity of suffering and a happy ending in a history of unprecedented evil (and they themselves contributed to such a “happy” ending in their view). Perhaps they have their national identity so strongly internalized that it is difficult for them to think of themselves within a community other than the Polish one. People tend to think and act within specific cultural formations and thought horizons shaped by cultural patterns. Therefore, the story of Polish antisemitism is not so much a story about individual people as it is a story about a culture, an “antisemitic social code” understood by all participants in that culture (Janion, 2009, p. 71).

The Bechdel Test as a proposal for reading

The Bechdel Test was developed by American cartoonist Alison Bechdel as a kind of joke (and like any good joke it was very much on the serious side) in 1985 to measure not so much the degree, but the way women are represented in film productions (al-

entanglement of the magazine (considering its subordination to communist ideology as its main weakness) than on the content published in it.

though it can be successfully applied to other cultural texts). In order to pass the test, the work must meet three conditions simultaneously: first, it must feature at least two women, who, secondly, talk to each other, and, thirdly, about something other than a man.²⁷ It is the combination of these three conditions that makes Bechdel's test not so much a tool for quantitatively measuring the presence of women in films (after all, it is clear to the naked eye that there are a lot of them), but rather a qualitative study of what their presence is and what role they play in the plot/narrative.

The fact that so many productions still fail the Bechdel Test shows that female characters are most often treated as a supplement to male protagonists: they are a trophy, an ornament, a prize, or alternatively they may be lonely heroines who do not, however, establish autonomous relationships with other women that function outside the male world. The Bechdel Test is not meant to be applied mechanically, "to be passed", but rather to allow reflection on why there are still so many works that do not meet these seemingly simple criteria, and what this says about the values and mental horizons of our culture.

The Bechdel Test does not have to talk about the active exclusion, in this case of women, from the repertoire of film characters with adventures, inner lives, names and biographies. It might as well be about thoughtlessness – and that seems much more interesting to me, because it exposes the rules of discourse and the limits of the cultural imagination. In the male-centric culture of the West, in which the man is the default subject and addressee of most utterances, one simply cannot come up with such a radical idea as two women who can have experiences and interests unrelated to men, and more than that – horror of horrors – like each other.

Through what is not there, the Bechdel Test draws attention to the mechanisms of constructing Otherness. This does not mean that there is no Other; she is there, she may be an object of fascination, desire, wonder, abomination, fear and so on, but she will always be defined by her otherness. She will remain a phantasm, a stereotype and a construct. And she will be unheard in what she wants to say about herself and her relations with the rest of the others. This is usually of no interest to representatives of the dominant group. The analogy may seem risqué, but the same is true of Jews in Polish culture. They are undoubtedly present; Polish culture always has taken a stance

27 Alison Bechdel herself prefers the name Bechdel-Wallace test because it was her friend Liz Wallace who is said to have come up with the idea for the test criteria. Bechdel was convinced that Wallace had been inspired by Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own*. There have been several modifications of the test and proposals for additional criteria, including that the characters be named, particularly important from the point of view of my reflections. There is also – albeit in a dormant version – a Polish site aggregating Polish films (not) meeting the Bechdel Test, created as part of the Queer Feminist Film project. The site adds two additional criteria, proposed by Joanna Krakowska, forming the 'Krakowska Test' (Does the woman in the film play a role other than that of wife, lover or mother? Are the problems of a woman in a film related to something other than love for a man or motherhood?) Interestingly, among Polish films that meet the Bechdel Test and even the Krakowska Test, there is a large representation of Holocaust and camp films. These are, of course: *Ostatni etap* [The Last Stage] (Jakubowska, 1947) and *Trzy kobiety* [Three Women] (Różewicz, 1956), *Pasażerka* [Passenger] (Munk, 1963), *Zaproszenie* [The Invitation] (Jakubowska, 1985), *Jeszcze tylko ten las* [Just Beyond That Forest] (Łomnicki, 1991), *W ukryciu* [In Hiding] (Kidawa-Błoński, 2013) and *Ida* (Pawlikowski, 2013).

on Jews, but it is mostly a stance based on stereotypes and phantasms, devoid of curiosity about the Jewish world²⁸. A “Jewish” version of the Bechdel Test would therefore have to test whether Jews appear in Polish stories about their rescue somehow other than as subjects of rescuing. What criteria would our test need to have? The criterion of the presence of two Jewish women or men in the story is, of course, absurd, which complicates the other two conditions. Besides, the point here is not to construct a precise tool, but to propose a certain methodological attentiveness – how are Jews depicted in this testimony? Even scholars who deal with the Polish Holocaust-related discourse and demonstrate its reactionary nature, its nationalism and antisemitism masked to varying degrees (sometimes poorly), end up writing about Poles, a paradox from which this article, too, will not escape. However, I propose two criteria for this imperfect gauge, two lines of inquiry for the careful researcher: the criterion of the name and the criterion of the survival of the “rescued” person(s), or at least an interest in their further fate.

Name

One must take into account here the reality of life under military occupation, in which it was often better not to know names and surnames, as well as false names, changed names, children’s names, all condemned to oblivion, in place of life-saving Christian names. What matters here is the attitude toward the fact that another person has a name. A name is a mark of identity and separateness for every human being, although, save for some exceptional cases, we do not choose it ourselves. Thus, it is also a sign of belonging to a community; the act of naming is an act of acceptance into a cultural institution (the state, the family), of the singling out of a new biological life as a social being and, to use the language of Hanna Arendt, of deeming it *worthy of preservation*. Thus understood, a name is, in the story of the Holocaust, the opposite to a number (to which the Nazis reduced concentration camp inmates), the opposite to the impersonal mass through which the Holocaust is also told. And so, a name serves an important function in rituals and practices of both collective and individual memory. Several hundred of the most popular pre-war Jewish and Polish names, from Aba to Żanna, are engraved on the inner wall of the Umschlagplatz Monument. Participants in the March of Remembrance, which is organized on the anniversary of the start of the great liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto, receive ribbons with the names of the victims, which they later tie to a chosen place²⁹. Grodzka Gate-NN Theater Center in Lublin has

28 Which does not mean a lack of morbid fascination with the phantasm.

29 For example, in 2021 it was the fence of Krasiński Garden, and in 2022 (the 60th anniversary of the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto) a special installation in front of the Jewish Historical Institute building on Tłomackie Street.

been conducting, since 2011, a project that is utopian in concept, symbolically eloquent, and at the same time based on diligent and painstaking archival work, to create a complete archive of the pre-war Jewish quarter in Lublin: not only a list of its residents, but also their addresses and, if possible, other personal data. Remembering the victims by their names is to reverse the order of annihilation, it is a gesture against the Holocaust³⁰, and is also a fulfilment of the obligation to remember “our” dead.

In Zbigniew Herbert’s poem *Pan Cogito o potrzebie ścisłości* [Mr. Cogito on the Need for Precision], Mr. Cogito wants to know the exact number “of all those who perished / in the struggle with inhuman power” in order to precisely “call [them] by the first name [and] provide for a journey” that is, to grieve, to close the ritual and process of mourning. The poem inspired the authors of a government program, launched in 2019 and dedicated to commemorating Poles murdered for helping Jews to entitle it “Called by Name”. According to the program’s main initiator, Magdalena Gawin, the idea is to commemorate Poles whose fate “has not had a chance to resound in collective memory for years”³¹. Justyna Kowalska-Leder, in her brilliant analysis of the “Called by Name” exhibition (which is the visual hallmark of the program), points out the detailed, almost veristic descriptions of the sadism of the Germans toward Poles, and the laconic treatment of the Jews, who simply “perish” quickly, efficiently “removing themselves from sight” and giving the scene back to the Poles. The exhibition also doesn’t call out too many Jews by name, as if they don’t need to be mourned or “provided for the journey”.

This contrast of Jewish namelessness with the hypertrophy of Polish names, surnames and toponyms is telling, but it is not new. Contrary to what the exhibition’s authors maintain, Poles, including peasants and villagers, had been “called by name” already in the Polish People’s Republic; they are quite literally called out in Gontarz and Kidawa’s film (Kidawa, 1968), with voices known from the *Polska Kronika Filmowa*, in a long, almost seven-minute sequence, a litany of village names, surnames and first names, with the age at which they were killed for helping Jews. The calls are accompanied by images of villages and small Polish towns, as well as shocking stories from witnesses about the details of German brutality against the rescuers. No Jewish name is mentioned in this sequence, there is only “that Jew” who, at the sight of the German gendarmes, threw down his water bowl and ran to hide, and the “Jewish woman” whom the Germans abused together with her “grandfather” (“first the Germans battered the grandfather and the Jewish woman, and then they chased the grandfather out into the yard”).

In the rescue stories I analyzed, Jewish names are very often replaced by numbers: the figurative “hundreds” and the meticulous bookkeeping of the rescued: “A few hun-

30 Although it is also pointed out that excessive and unreflective use of the names and stories of specific victims in memory practices (e.g. in museums) can lead to their secondary instrumentalization and the temptation to identify with them too easily. See: Borowicz & Pajczkowska (2017).

31 See: <https://instytutpileckiego.pl/pl/zawolani-po-imieniu> (*Zawołani po imieniu*, b.d.).

dred Jewish children”; “Sister Ludwika saved forty children aged 10–15” (Szubówna, 1968); “thirty two children survived in Turkowice” (Szubówna, 1968); “13 birth certificates, 40 Jewish women” (Frącek, 1983); “100 children in basements” (Frącek, 1983, p. 5); “The Franciscan Sisters of the Family of Mary saved the lives of over 500 children and adolescents, and of about 250 seniors. In addition, they gave short-term assistance to about 400 people” (Stopniak, 1983); “The Congregation of the Sisters of the Resurrection hid 22 children in their 6 orphanages” (Frącek, 1983, p. 5); “over the course of a few years, over 200 children were kept in the children’s home in Płudy” (Szubówna, 1968). “Peasants from around Narew [...] gave shelter to numerous Jews who were able to sneak out here. Often these were large groups, with small children” (Rutkowski, 1968b, p. 11); “Piotr Głód, a peasant from near Przemyśl, together with his family fed a group of 26 Jews hiding in an earth dugout in the forest. They all survived” (Rutkowski, 1968c, p. 11); “the Polish village BAR (near Lviv) fed 18 Jews hiding in a nearby forest. They all lived to see the liberation” (Rutkowski, 1968c, p. 11); “Jadwiga Strzelecka, director of the RGO orphanage in Warsaw, placed ten children in her facility” (Rutkowski, 1968c, p. 11). Whenever the number of Jews cannot be established, an enumeration of the rescuers, homes, institutions or even premises might be given as an alibi: “In total, the author identified about 560 members of the Polish clergy who participated in helping Jews in 381 localities and at 479 various institutions, houses or premises” (Stopniak, 1983).

The nameless masses of Jews are in stark contrast to the abundance of Polish names and surnames, listed meticulously in long litanies. The article by Piotr Godlewski and Wiesław Krzysztofowicz, “Społeczeństwo polskie wobec Zagłady Żydów” [Polish Society and the Holocaust of the Jews], published in the 5th issue of the *Więź* monthly in 1974, seems representative here. The article is an attempt at a brief historical synthesis depicting the martyrdom of the Jews during World War II and the stages of this martyrdom, of which the Germans remain the perpetrators and the Poles the compassionate witnesses and zealous rescuers. The authors reconstruct the various stages of the extermination of the Jews and describe the mood of Polish society; the views of the underground authorities and various political groups on the issue of the persecution of the Jewish population (all of them had a positive attitude toward the Jews and declared that they would help them); the various positions presented in the underground press, pointing out that antisemitics were only “the shrieks published in the rags of fascist groups, without much influence”; the establishment and activities of Żegota, which extended help to about four thousand people out of the approximately twenty thousand hiding in Warsaw and its surroundings. The number of Poles rescuing Jews is estimated at about one hundred thousand, and it is noted that some of those in hiding perished along with the Poles. Żegota’s cooperation with the clergy and the active participation of the Catholic clergy (priests and religious congregations) in helping Jews in hiding is also addressed, noting that this was initially met with scepticism from the Jewish side, as “Jews feared denationalization and the loss of their ancestral faith”.

The passages about *shmaltsowniks* and Poles who collaborated with the occupiers in the persecution and extermination of Jews are in a very emotional and judgemental tone, with emphasis on the marginality of such attitudes:

Shmaltsowniks, as those who blackmailed Jews for profit were called at the time, originated from the dregs of large-city and small-town populations, which exist in every country, also in times of peace, and whose conduct provides ample material for the criminal chronicles. Although their exploits echoed loudly, although, for understandable reasons, the eyes of the persecuted and terrified people in hiding were constantly on them – after all, the decisive and characteristic attitude of Poles, people of all classes, professions and beliefs, in the city and in the countryside, was quite the opposite. (Godlewski & Krzysztofowicz, 1974, p. 88)

Most importantly, the article's conclusion firmly states that Poles passed the test.

The article mentions numerous names of Poles, mainly priests and nuns. However, it does not specify the first or last names of the rescued/hidden Jews; they remain anonymous. The only Jews mentioned by name are Emanuel Ringelblum, who is quoted in two places, and Jankiel Wiernik as the author of an account *Rok w Treblince* [The Year at Treblinka] published by the underground. This article is, in a sense, a model for describing the attitude of Polish society toward the Holocaust. The story is told from the perspective of Polish conscience, not efficiency. What is important is the intention itself, the desire to rescue, the emotional attitude (compassion) and not whether the lives of specific people were saved in the end. The prevailing tone is one of compassion rather than of solidarity: Jews were separate, they were not part of us, our society; they are treated as a certain “mass”, a distinct group. The authors do not care what happened later to those rescued, they emphasize rescuing – in the imperfective aspect – rather than the act of having rescued, or where and how the Jews died, as if the mere fact that one “wanted to help” was more important than personal, individual life and death. Poles are mentioned by name and described in detail; the rescuers are more important than the rescued. Jews remain nameless, their distinctive feature is being condemned to death; they are described in general terms or not at all.

And yet, even against the backdrop of this “norm”, the nonchalance of the story of Father Stanisław Wiśniewski is striking. He published the account of his “adventure” (the convention of this narrative is almost picaresque) in two magazines: in 1973 as “Pani... siostró” [Miss... Sister] in *Gość niedzielny* (Wiśniewski, 1973) and a year later in *Więź* as “Ołtarz bezpiecznym schronieniem” [Altar as a Safe Haven] (Wiśniewski, 1974). The latter title is as literal as possible, for the text tells the story of three Jewish boys who hid under the altar in the church. The author of the emotional memoir, the priest Stanisław Wiśniewski, displaced from Pomerania in 1939, spent the occupation in Mińsk Mazowiecki, where one Saturday in the summer of 1942 he witnessed an extermination action. He describes the pain of the Polish witness and the noble passivity of the Jewish victims, lending them a strange dignity – a description I will return to later. The day after the tragic Saturday for the Jews, Father Wiśniewski heard some murmurs coming

from under the altar's mensa, but ignored them; only after the Mass did he learn from Sister Regina Sankowska of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Family of Mary about three Jewish boys (aged about 12–14) hiding in the chapel, whose names we never learn. The boys themselves asked “Miss Sister” for “some bread” and offered to pay, which the Sister did not accept; instead, she ran to the priest to consult with him about the situation:

We understood each other without words. For there was not the slightest doubt about how to proceed. We were absolutely of one mind in this respect. However, it was necessary to seriously consider the situation that had arisen, in order to both save the boys and not bring misfortune on ourselves and... – God forbid – on the entire hospital staff. Everybody knew this: Death penalty for hiding Jews, for giving them help and for not reporting their whereabouts. (Wisniewski, 1973, p. 6, 1974, p. 103)

Sisters Kinga Kurowska and Walentyna Worek were enlisted for the help, that is bringing food to the children three times a day “for four long days”. On the fifth day, the boys – “to which they readily agreed” – fed and supplied with food, were to go by side roads to the nearest village. Father Wiśniewski calls the Jewish boys heroes, because “these little boys endured the hardship of their martyrdom heroically”. However, he doesn't remember their names or what happened to them afterwards:

At that moment the world ceased to exist for them, and they for the world, today I don't remember the names of those boys. Nor do I know if they are alive and what their fate was since leaving their hiding place in the chapel. What I do know, however, is that two of them were brothers. (Wisniewski, 1973, p. 6, 1974, p. 103)

The Jewish boys are nearly stylized to be some sort of romantic street urchins of the Holocaust, but the priest is more interested in building the storyline and emotional tension than in what happened to those children who escaped from a pogrom. He also neatly inserts himself into the list of “the rescuing Poles”, although in fact it was the boys who saved themselves; they overcame their fear and asked the nun for help. After that, the nuns took care of the children for four days; the priest's heroism comes down to the fact that he and the nun “understood each other without words”. In addition, after a few days he got rid of the problem by sending the boys to the village. I do not want to downplay the significance of his consent, it was a gesture of great importance, because, after all, he could have chased the boys away or sent them to the gendarmerie station, but I do wish to draw attention to the mechanism of constructing a legend. Alicja Podbielska demonstrates how Jewish agency is overlooked and disregarded in contemporary Polish rescue stories (See: Podbielska, 2019b)³²; a similar mechanism can be observed in the narratives from the PRL.

32 Jewish agency is noted and emphasized by Helena Balicka-Kozłowska (1988) in the text *Kto ratował, kogo ratowano* [Who rescued, Who Was Rescued]. She writes that a distinction should be made between “the rescued” and “the rescuers”, and that most Jews hiding outside the ghettos were not passive at all; on the contrary, they were very much active in organizing mutual aid.

Returning to the issue of the (lack of) name: Jews also appear in these stories as described if not by number, then by some of their traits, qualities, which by their non-distinctiveness show well their place in the rescue story, e.g. as “little girls” (Szubówna, 1968); “sick Jews from Brodnica” (Balicka-Kozłowska, 1988); “At St. Anne’s in Warsaw, two Jewish women were janitors, and during the uprising one was employed with Sister Filipina Olejniczak at the Centre to cook meals for the insurgents. After the fall of the Old Town, many Jews came also to the Centre” (Mistecka, 1979, p. 56); “Sister Janina Łabędzka sent Jewish women to help in the kitchen. There were a few of them” (Mistecka, 1979, p. 56).

However, there are also cases when the name takes on a special significance. “I don’t remember his Jewish name”, states Władysław Pawełek³³, whose family gave shelter to a 12-year-old, matter-of-factly. But the Jewish name doesn’t matter, because the family immediately gave him a Polish one. The boy was part of a group of fugitives from Krakow who offered money for help, but it was too numerous, according to Pawełek: “There’s nothing you can do with this many people”. One of the fugitives made a particularly passionate plea to at least hide his son. “That’s what happened, the boy stayed, and we named him STEFAN. The rest of them continued on to seek their salvation”. Not even: “we gave him a *Polish* name”, simply: “we named him”. Of course, this made sense in the reality of the occupation, and the boy, who survived with his family until liberation, later signed his name Stefan on a postcard sent to the Pawełek family in 1947 from Bamberg, but the important thing for me here is that a Jewish name is not even worth remembering. Unless it comes as a threat, a sinister distinction, a stigma: “One day in 1940, a little weeping girl of about 12–14 years of age came to our door”, recounts Ms. Julia Biesiada. “She quickly revealed her terrible secret, that her name was Szoszana Brzoza”. The girl’s appearance had already given her away (“We had no doubt that she was a Jewish child”; “Kto ratuje jedno życie – ratuje cały świat”, 1983, p. 10), but revealing the name, this “terrible secret”, means here as much as admitting one’s death sentence-assured identity, for the name is unambiguously Jewish; after all, while Polonized Jews bore Polish names, Poles never gave their children Jewish names. Szoszana and her sisters survived, to which I will return later.

A Jewish name as a stigma condemning one to death is a recurring motif in stories about children kept in orphanages, foster homes or convents. The children’s Jewish past, marked by their name, must be forgotten, and they are often taught this while still in their parents’ care, along with learning how to say the Catholic prayers, although very young children were not always able to grasp the importance of secrecy, unwittingly confirming the sentence embodied by their true name. Ewa Kurek-Lesik cites Sister Ewelina Nałtowska’s story about “little Tomuś”, who was brought to the orphanage in Krakow by the police, and who straightforwardly said, “my surname has to be Wró-

33 Pawełek also had trouble remembering the boy’s surname: “His surname, if I recall correctly, was KNOBLAUCH. I remember because in Polish it means onion, something we spoke about at that time” (Pawełek, 1985, p. 11).

blewski or else the Germans will kill me". Little Konradek, hidden by the Daughters of Charity, kept saying with zeal: "Mister German, mister German, I am not a Jew, not a Jew". Another boy, "with a dark complexion, when asked about his name, answered with childish simplicity: 'I'm not Icek, I'm Jacek' and then he carefully crossed himself and quickly recited a prayer" (Kurek-Lesik, 1987)³⁴. Older children internalized their Polish identities so deeply that it was difficult to establish their real surnames. Mother Tekla Budnowska told Ewa Kurek-Lesik of how she tried to find out the real names of a group of newly arrived Jewish children in order to write them down for the time after the war.

There was a girl, whose name according to the false birth certificate was Marysia Wojtasik. So, I asked her what her name was before, and she says,

– My name has always been Wojtasik.

I asked her again later, one of the sisters did as well, but she kept saying her name has always been Wojtasik. In the end we left her alone. We asked another girl, whose name on the birth certificate I no longer remember³⁵, and she replies,

– My name was Jarzabek.

– In that case, my name was Jarzabek, too – says Marysia Wojtasik – Why can't I be Jarzabek? (Kurek-Lesik, 1987, p. 254)

The authors of some accounts want not only to count the rescued, but also to name them. These are some of the accounts written down by nuns personally involved in caring for Jewish children, such as the account of Sister Lucyna Mistecka, who tries to name all those who came under her care during the occupation. She mentions the Jewish girls Rosa and Hinda who were taken in just before the liquidation of the ghetto in Mir, and then persuaded by the nuns to go to the forest and join a group of Jews hiding there (both survived until liberation). Her memoirs mention a "five-year-old Zosia" hiding in a Lviv convent with two boys (she could have simply written "a girl and two boys"), "Mrs. A. Prawdzic-Tell", as well as "Oswald Rufeisen", who is described as a hero for having warned his "compatriots" in the Mir ghetto of a planned pogrom, supplying them with weapons; later he was "betrayed by a fellow Jew" and hid with the nuns for sixteen months. During that time, Oswald Rufeisen received baptism and communion, and then, facing a German search, "supplied by them [the sisters] with everything he needed, he went into the woods and joined the partisans"³⁶. Whenever she is able to do so, Sister Lucyna calls the rescued by name and surname, and ends her account

34 Ewa Kurek-Lesik's text was published in an academic historical annual, so it is, strictly speaking, beyond the scope of my inquiry, but it seems very interesting for two reasons: firstly, the author relies on elicited sources, and secondly, the author herself is interesting, given that in the Third Polish Republic she became well-known as a researcher downplaying the persecution of the Jewish population during the Holocaust and the originator of the bizarre idea that the ghettos were a substitute for statehood for the Jews, which they never had, and that they lived better in them than the Poles behind the wall.

35 Here, contrary to the story of Pawetek, the rescuer forgot the false Polish name and remembered the original one, but this is likely due to the stubbornness of Marysia, as well as the fact that she was later a witness in court proceedings to establish the who the girl's father was.

36 In April 1945 he stayed at the convent of the Discalced Carmelites in Vilnius.

with an appendix – a list of the children kept at her convent in Żoliborz (Mistecka, 1979, pp. 51–59)³⁷.

Names and personalities also appear more frequently in the stories of left-wing activists, in which Jews are more likely to appear as comrades in battle and friends, as well as in individualized narratives that take a one-on-one perspective, so to speak: one rescuer (or one family) and one/few rescued, examples of which I will cite in the section on personal accounts.

Children

The rescue of Jewish children occupies a particularly large part of the press coverage of help given to Jews. A child is, to put it somewhat perversely, a very “graceful” victim: uncontroversial and innocent, evoking pity, so one can feel compassion, and trepidation, for a child’s helplessness and powerlessness emphasizes the bestiality of its persecutors. It can be said that children are “good Jews” because they speak Polish, they do not (yet) rule the world, they are not culturally different in a way that arouses irritation (as traditional Jews are), but are at the most a curiosity. Besides they do not set conditions, do not bargain, do not demand rights and recognition. They are also “graceful” subjects of stories because they simply trigger the protective reflexes in most people. The accounts are teeming with expressions such as “miserable, lice-ridden boy...” (E. Kurek-Lesik, 1987, p. 257), “a wretched, lice-ridden child” (Mistecka, 1979, p. 56), “a small, weeping girl” („Kto ratuje jedno życie – ratuje cały świat”), “pale, unlike a child, skin and bones” (Kurek-Lesik, 1987, p. 257), but also “a gorgeous Jewish boy” (Kurek-Lesik, 1987, p. 257), “big black eyes” (Frącek, 1983, p. 5), etc. Saving the most innocent, on the other hand, is the most heroic act possible, the most sacred of all. Then again, Jewish children are not quite so innocent. Their sin is the risk that they bring to their saviours. They do this by means of their “remarkably Semitic appearance” (Frącek, 1983, p. 5), by acting unlike other children, or by their very presence.

Of course, texts about nuns rescuing Jewish children abound with descriptions of their heroism, humility, virtues and courage. I’ll skip them as I’m more interested in

37 Jadwiga Piotrowska, during the war an employee of the Department of Welfare and Health of the Warsaw Municipal Board, and a co-worker of Irena Sendler. The home of Piotrowska’s parents at 9 Lekarska Street housed an emergency shelter for Jewish children being led out of the ghetto. In an interview for *Słowo Powszechne*, when asked if she keeps in touch with the people she once helped, Piotrowska answers yes, but “few of the rescued children stayed in Poland; they write to me from abroad, and even now they want to help us by sending foreign goodies”. However, she does not give any names. Interestingly, in this conversation, it is Irena Sendlerowa who is mentioned as Piotrowska’s co-worker, not the other way around. The “invention” of Irena Sendlerowa as the main icon of Polish rescuers did not take place until the beginning of the 21st century (Rutkowska, M., & Piotrowska, J., 1983). After the war, two Jewish children, Halina and Janek, remained with Piotrowska and her parents. An uncle came for Halina and took her to England; as for Janek (Josek Buschbaum), Piotrowska wanted to adopt him, but his family also found him and he left Poland with them (See: Bikont, 2017, pp. 155–168).

what the sisters themselves had to say about the children. What is striking, however, is the emphasis on the fact that the rescuing of Jewish children by Catholic women was a special sacrifice, which is underscored especially by priests or professional historians who write about it, and much less often by the nuns themselves. Sister Matylda Getter, an exceptionally accomplished rescuer, who is said to have been accused of “saving Jews at the expense of her sisters’ lives” always responded: “I’m saving a human being” (Frącek, 1983, p. 5). Nevertheless, the accounts show a kind of fixation on the appearance of the children, especially the girls, and on the question of their Jewishness precisely, as if they were not quite those Biblical “neighbours” for whom it is so glorious to give one’s life. The Jewish girls distract, disturb, but also win the hearts of the nuns, “disarming them with their charm”, like the “pretty dark Jewish girl” Zosia, who looked at Sister Anuncjata and called her “mom”. From then on “this little Zosia, spiffed up, cleaned up, walked around the house cheering up the adults” (Mistecka, 1979, p. 56). The presence of Jewish girls seems almost an act of provocation in the kitchen run by the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception at the Chief Welfare Council:

Kazimierzowska Street is bustling with life from kindergarten to university. Among this multitude there are also Jewish girls. Authentic: redheaded, curly-haired, freckled, with protruding ears and characteristic eyelids. Obvious. No one could make a mistake. Everyone knows that hiding a Jew is punished with death. So, the Mother Superior calls a conference with the sisters: “Is it prudent to risk it for a dozen Jewish girls?” It is up to us whether they are to stay or leave. Silence. You could hear a pin drop. Not a sigh. We are ready. We won’t give up the Jewish children (Kurek-Lesik, 1987, p. 253).

An interesting gender difference manifests itself in the accounts about rescuing Jewish children. Those written by men (usually priests) tend to focus on numbers, praising the heroism of the entire clergy and ritual affirmations of the noble attitude of the Polish nation. The accounts written by sisters and nuns are not free from the apologetics of heroism and the virtues of the sisters, but they are also always closer to everyday life. They cover organizational details concerning logistics, provisions, daily schedules, etc., and above all, they are closer to the children themselves. They mention their characteristics, both individual (“Irenka Więckowska was religious and distinguished herself with great generosity during the Warsaw Uprising in carrying the wounded” (Mistecka, 1979, p. 53), “Oleś was sensitive and concerned about the fate of Lord Jesus” (Kurek-Lesik, 1987, p. 269), and “little Daniel Lancberg was a fussy eater” (Kurek-Lesik, 1987, p. 259) as well as collective. Sister Teresa Frącek writes:

The Jewish children, initially fearful and distrustful, trembling at the sight of the Germans and every voice coming from the courtyard, gained confidence and ease over time. The nuns treated them on an equal footing with the Polish ones, and tried to create a family atmosphere for them to forget their experiences and the horror of death (Frącek, 1983, p. 5).

More interesting, however, is what Sister Lucyna Mistecka reports: that the Jewish girls “blew their covers” (in front of the other children and in front of the staff who did

not know their origins) with their above-average knowledge of the Old Testament; that they “somehow recognized each other”, and that the conversations they held often betrayed their background. “Then their parents had to look for another shelter for them”, the author states laconically, and this is a somewhat typical ellipsis for Polish Holocaust discourse, which says a lot without saying anything – that the Jewish women were threatened with denunciation by both Polish children and Polish orphanage staff.

The description of the children’s disarming vulnerability and fear is also sometimes extended to Jews in general, although in that case it doesn’t and isn’t meant to arouse so much tenderness as rather... puzzlement? Jews are “like children”: naive, passive, defenceless, docile, unwilling to believe their fate. Like stubborn children, they know better and do not always want to take advantage of the help offered to them by Poles. Or, as with children, they do not understand what awaits them and therefore endanger themselves and others unnecessarily. “They deluded themselves a lot, they exposed themselves unnecessarily. Some were impossible to keep at home!”, recalls Maria Bogucka (Paszkievicz, 1985a). Sometimes their terror is dehumanized: “their eyes stick out of their orbits with fear”, “you get goosebumps” (Mistecka, 1979, p. 58). Other times, however, their passivity is shown as noble, as in the aforementioned article by Father Stanisław Wiśniewski:

It was incredibly painful to see these barefoot and shabbily clad prisoners surrounded by a bunch of armed thugs in uniform. This horror was compounded by the fact that among the deportees were women and children, who clung to the folds of their mothers’ dresses as they trotted along, while the armed thugs urged the defenseless people being led to slaughter and deprived of their right to life with their rifle butts.

This attitude of the Jews, full of resignation, and the strange calmness and solemnity they maintained in the face of abuse and brutal violence, distinguished them from their executioners, arousing the best sentiments and sympathies of the entire Polish society, whose eyes often welled up with heartfelt compassion. But it was also what facilitated the monstrous mission of their executioners. Besides, anyone who would have tried to save themselves by escaping would have inevitably received a bullet from a rifle. (Wiśniewski, 1973)

One way or another, Jews are different. Ewa Berberyusz (1987) wrote in *Tygodnik Powszechny*, as part of a debate following the publication of an article by Jan Błóński, that the persecuted Jews, especially in the second half of the occupation, had already been so far removed from Polish society that human solidarity, as felt by a significant portion of Poles, no longer applied to them. In a personal statement entitled “Wina przez zaniechanie” [Guilty by Omission], Berberyusz recalls the war times: she was ten years old, had frostbitten hands and feet, her father had to go into hiding and she was hungry.

However lowly and precarious a fate I might have faced, it was nothing like the fate of my Jewish peers in the ghetto sneaking stealthily through the streets of the Aryan side in search of food. The state of deprivation and hopelessness of these children could not be compared with anything, not even with the tragedy of the children of Zamojszczyzna [...]. I dare say that in the case of the Jews, some watershed was crossed, some threshold, which instead of

“mobilizing” the society, did the opposite: it paralyzed them and made it “easier” to turn one’s back. (Berberysz, 1987)

The author mentions that she herself “turned her back” twice:

Twice a child from the ghetto came within my sight, twice I pushed away from myself the first impulse to make contact and simply to stuff his rags with food. Out of fear? Yes, I was afraid – all this was happening in plain sight, and the Jewish child was so very much branded (not so much because of facial features, but due to its “inhumane”, Job-like condition). So, I was afraid of the consequences, but was this the only reason? Or perhaps a role was also played by this dark watershed, allowing me to conclude that this peer of mine was already beyond the limit of human solidarity? (Berberysz, 1987)

Berberysz believes this was not just about the fact that this “Job-like” child was Jewish, because “in our day-to-day we, the children, instinctively protected the Jewish children playing outside with us if, for example, we saw a German. Yes, we did, but these children were like us, they were on our side, there wasn’t such a stark difference between us”. Thus, what set apart the Jewish children who were “not like us” was their extreme deprivation, emaciation and, surely, fear. This Polish woman’s story confirms that the condition of the Jewish population was incomparably worse than that of the Polish population, visibly worse, and at the same time it was this very visibility that allowed the difference between Jews and Poles to be emphasized and intensified. A feedback mechanism is at work here: Jews were easy to isolate from society and oppress because they were different, or rather, because they were the Other, and at the same time their condition: downtrodden, destitute, “Job-like”, confirms their otherness and distances them even further from the Polish community, which is defined here as a community of human solidarity.

Personal accounts. (Effectively) rescued, (un)grateful

The term (effectively) rescued (Polish: *(u)ratowani*) is not a fortunate one. I use it to emphasize the perfective aspect of the verb, as well as to underscore how infrequently the Polish stories about rescuing Jews cover this part: whether or not the given person survived the war usually falls beyond the scope of the storytellers’ interest. However, if the passive form of “rescued” stresses the passivity of the victims, as I mentioned earlier on, the form “(effectively) rescued” also takes away their agency, suggesting that they owe their survival to an external factor, specifically, to the self-sacrificing, heroic and active Poles. The same applies to the form “saved” (Polish: *ocalony*). As Joanna Tokarska-Bakir put it: “it objectifies a group of people while granting a false salvific omnipotence on others”. For this reason, this researcher proposes the form *ocalali* (survivors) and *ocalajacy* (those who rescued), which seems to better reflect the actual state

of the matter (Tokarska-Bakir, 2008, p. 175). I am going to stick to the phrases “Poles who rescued Jews” and “rescuing Jews” descriptively as these expressions are firmly established in the public discourse.

“Personal accounts”, on the other hand, is a category with a double meaning. I apply it both to personal accounts – when a particular person (on their own behalf or on the behalf of their family) describes the story of helping a particular person (or people) of Jewish origin, and to the description of the personal relationship that developed between the rescuers and the rescued as a result. This is the group of stories from which we can learn the most about specific Jews: people, individuals with history and character traits, rather than tokens in the game for the good name of Poles.

Eugenia Mowczanowa writes with tenderness about Irena Fiszerowa, a Czech Jew whom her fiancé brought from Izbica and with whom she lived in a tailor’s workshop on Elektoralna Street, sleeping on one couch. Mowczanowa’s brother secured her an identity card which once belonged to the late Irena Ringwelska, so that, taking advantage of her knowledge of German (she was born in Vienna or Graz), Irena could take a job at the German Court, where she worked until the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising, sometimes providing the Polish underground with valuable information. During the uprising, Irena Fiszerowa demonstrated personal courage by driving the Germans away from the courtyard where civilians had taken refuge. Eugenia describes her as “charming, incredibly nice, very jolly (any other person would have broken down a hundred times)”.

A striking beauty, bleached hair... She spoke with a Czech accent, but we had no trouble understanding each other. [...] She was hardly ever afraid. After the Uprising, a colleague from the court made it possible for her to escape a transport. She went to Germany, and from there on to Israel. (Paszkievicz, 1985b, p. 11)

The two women kept in touch by correspondence, and later in the account Eugenia cites heartfelt letters from Irena signed “Your *kamratka*”, in which the “*kamratka*” constantly urges her to come to Israel or to meet somewhere in Europe, in increasingly poor Polish, which she forgets, as she used it only to contact her friend from Poland. Eugenia writes that she would very much like to see Irena again but doesn’t know if it will be possible. Ending the story, however, she notes something of the Czech Jewish woman’s recklessness:

I think that during the war she didn’t realize how she was putting us at risk. After all, so many people came to the tailor’s shop, after all, there was a wall across Elektoralna, and the yard was full of Germans. At first, we were terribly afraid, we explained to her that she was endangering the whole family, but she just kissed our hands. (Paszkievicz, 1985b, p. 11)

Eugenia Mowczanowa’s account comes from a long, two-part article published in the Polish-language section of *Folks-Sztyme* entitled “Miększe serca i trochę odwagi. Ślady pomocy Żydom w pamięci tych, którzy jej udzielali” [Softer Hearts and Come Courage.

Traces of Help for Jews as Remembered by Those Who Gave It] (Paszkievicz, 1985a, 1985b). Joanna Paszkievicz, who collected these traces, explains her intentions in the introduction: she searched among those decorated by Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, but she wanted her interviewees to be diverse.

Sometimes they rescued many people whom they didn't even know, or they rescued one person with whom they had personal ties; other times they rescued as members of a particular organization, as religious people, or simply in a reflex of moral duty, which they did not analyze rationally. (Paszkievicz, 1985a, p. 9)

The editor writes that they have only one thing in common, but a fundamental one: "they risked MORE" (capitals in the original). And while their motives and circumstances varied, and each story is a "most individual" one, "the danger was the same – death. The Germans set a death penalty for helping Jews and they applied it consistently. Nothing more needs to be said" (Paszkievicz, 1985a, p. 9).

Some stories devote more space to the construction of shelters and hiding places for the Jews and the generosity of their Polish relatives; others, to the logistics of their organizational work. We find here the story of Maria Dziurzyńska-Hrabykowa, an employee of the Krakow Arbeitsamt associated with Żegota, who speaks of the futility of her efforts with striking succinctness:

At the time everyone thought that if only they have a work card, they will survive... Tens of people implored me in terror for a certificate for themselves, for their children. So, I became a wholesaler, so to speak. In order to produce a work card for someone, you had to: steal a blank print, and these were strictly controlled pre-numbered forms, stamp it with a real stamp, get the original signature of a German official. It was easiest to place people in gardening centres.

But one way or another – almost all of them perished (Paszkievicz, 1985a, p. 9).

This one-sentence summary of one's own rescue activities – "almost all of them perished" – may seem dry or callous but is in fact a very rare example of sincerity and sober summary of the Holocaust reality. While most Poles who talk about helping Jews focus on the "act" of rescuing itself, always in the imperfective aspect, because "it's the intentions that count", skipping altogether what happened afterwards to those they helped, Maria Dziurzyńska does not write about her intentions, instead, she writes about the deaths of Krakow's Jews. This is a shift to place the accent on the victims that is not that frequent at all.

Maria Rdułtowska-Krasiejko, on the other hand, complains that she helped Jews, and now that she is old and sick, there is no one to help her. Her account of how she helped her friend Czesia, whom she knew from before the war, is tinged with some bitter, very

personal resentment. Czesia was an actress³⁸, Maria's brother danced, "we often went to the theatre together". In 1943 Czesia came to Maria "supposedly for two days" and ended up staying for thirteen months.

Her husband brought her from somewhere near Siedlce, where she had been hiding in a fold out couch. My husband and I had two rooms; she was staying in one of them all the time. She couldn't go out because her Semitic looks were very obvious. (Paszkiewicz, 1985a, p. 9)

The story of Czesia's hiding is a story of Maria's complete sacrifice, even at the price of conflicts with her husband:

I gave up everything for her: I brought products, I cooked (a work colleague was surprised to see how much food I was taking home!) [...] My husband was against all this, but I said to him: – This is none of your business, the apartment is mine. Once he asked: – When is she finally going to leave? Why should you risk your life for her? – I answered: – I'm not going to tell her to leave, I don't have the strength for that. (Paszkiewicz, 1985a, p. 9)

When Czesia fell ill and had a high fever, "we suffered through it, giving her injections ourselves". The couple survived the Warsaw Uprising together with Czesia and went to the transit camp in Pruszków. "And so she survived, even though she looked so Jewish", concludes Maria with something akin to anger combined with admiration at the fact that Czesia made it again. However Czesia paid Maria back with gross ingratitude. She never even said "Marychna, thank you for helping me survive", complains Maria. "Once, after the war, I came to her house and I saw loads of blouses from abroad on the couch. No, she didn't tell me to take some. For my name day, she gave me six handkerchiefs. I haven't touched them even though it's been a dozen or so years. I don't use them, I don't feel like it" (Paszkiewicz, 1985a, p. 9). One could ask how come Maria received the Righteous Among the Nations medal if Czesia turned out to be so ungrateful³⁹.

Maria's account stands out from the rest presented in this article not only for the intensity of emotions, but also for its language: simple, reminiscent of the tattletales of Warsaw's streets, in contrast with the intelligentsia culture of the other stories. This makes it easier to label it as marked with class antisemitism, supposedly the domain of the uneducated strata (Dobrosielski, 2017b, pp. 365–382). This would surely be the easiest solution for an empathetic reader. But, at the same time, there is something very personal in this account, something that also allows it to be read as a story of complicated emotions between two women, former friends, and not just a Pole and a Jew. This of course is just one possible interpretation; the text is much too short for in-depth psychological analysis, I am merely sharing my intuition.

38 Czesława Broniszówna, a sister of Seweryna Broniszówna, actress, see: <https://new.getto.pl/pl/Osoby/B/Broniszowna-Czeslawa-Bronisz> (*Baza danych*, b.d.).

39 She received the medal in 1981, see: <https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/pdf-drupal/poland.pdf> (*Righteous Among the Nations honored by Yad Vashem by 1 January 2022*, b.d.).

Maria Bogucka, in turn, recalls “a very nice person”, a dentist from Trębacka Street named Honsztein, whom she did not manage to rescue:

I was supposed to pull this married couple out of the ghetto on Saturday (I already had a place for them in Świder), but someone (a Pole) didn't keep their word, and because of this silly little thing I had to postpone it until Monday. Meanwhile, the uprising broke out on Sunday and they perished. [...] I still can't forgive myself for this. (Paszkievicz, 1985a, p. 9)

Bogucka also speaks about the conditions and possibilities of rescuing: it was motivated by the fact that “I knew them, that we had some contacts before”. She also admits that “many people denounced. Especially in the countryside”, but it was a blue policeman that told her who was the snitch in her house. “I don't have practically any contact with the rescued, we don't exchange letters” – concludes Bogucka – “They probably thought this is normal” (Paszkievicz, 1985a, p. 9). “This” meaning the help given to them by Poles? Or the fact that they don't keep in touch with their rescuers? It is hard to tell, as it is also hard to tell whether Bogucka's succinct statement carries resentment or understanding that the victims of such trauma might have a thousand reasons to cut themselves off from any catalyzing memories and relationships. Or perhaps what resounds here is an underlying grudge that the rescued Jews may have thought that they simply deserved help from Poles, because they were not only citizens of the same country and neighbours, but also human beings?

Józef Szymczak from Elektoralna Street, like Maria Bogucka, also appreciates the role of pre-war social contacts as an impulse for helping Jews. As a boy who grew up within the area of three courtyards at the border of Śródmieście and Dzielnica Północna, he above all was aware of class divisions, not ethnic or religious ones: “Poor Jewish boys hung out with us, and the rich ones with Polish dandies”. Szymczak and his wife recall those in hiding, trying to remember their surnames (“– Wait a second, what was Mietek's surname? – Weintraub, I think. But it's not for sure”), even though he knows that surnames taken on during the occupation were not always real. He recalls Jurek Płoński, whose first name was Dawid (“and his father was Izrael”), he liaised with the ghetto and led people out through the sewers.

By the time he came to us, he was already 12 years old, but he was very small, delicate, he had great Aryan looks. He slept at a furniture store, but later he admitted to sleeping in graves. A type of a Warsaw street urchin. That kind of life could have demoralized him, but he is a very upright man. Later we found each other and corresponded. My God, how these people miss Poland! How they dream of Poland! (Paszkievicz, 1985b, p. 11)

After the war, Szymczak met with Płoński, who lives in the Megiddo kibbutz in Tel Aviv. Płoński's son died in the Golan Heights. Szymczak and his brother Zdzisław also keep in touch with other rescued, who live in Haifa, but they do not mention their surnames; perhaps because a part of this family lives in Paris and in Gothenburg, which might indicate that they were part of the March emigration. “Our ties are familial, as between brothers”, says Szymczak, “even though our political views have been turned

upside down, our world views remain the same”. Szymczak ends his story by saying that only now does he realize how much he and his brother endangered themselves and their families by helping Jews. “But my wife never said ‘no’”. At this point, the wife, who remembered the surname of Mietek Weintraub, chimes in with a remark that was used by the editor as the closing point: “The *schmaltzovniks* were the worst. My God... It was bandits from the National Armed Forces (Polish: *Narodowe Siły Zbrojne*) who killed Władka. And later I saw a woman in the street wearing her coat!” (Paszkievicz, 1985b, p. 11). Who was Władka? We don’t know. The rule of thumb is that we learn more about the rescued Jews, those who survived, than about those who were not rescued, and are therefore dead.

The case of Andrzej Klimowicz also shows that pre-war friendships and contacts opened up the way to involvement in helping Jews during the war. In 1938 he was invited by Leon Harari to Zduńska Wola to participate in a preparation camp for working Jewish youth who wanted to go to Palestine. Harari managed to emigrate before the outbreak of the war, thanks to which he was able to meet with Andrzej in Jerusalem years later. Klimowicz, as a member of the People’s Party (Polish: *Stronnictwo Ludowe*) cooperated closely with Żegota: Jewish underground activists, such as Adolf Berman, Leon Feiner, Salo Fiszgrund met at his tire centre throughout the occupation (Paszkievicz, 1985b, p. 11).

We find stories of friendship and personal ties most often when the contacts go back to pre-war times, less often whenever the Jews who received help were strangers. But in these cases too there are indications of deep attachment, especially if those involved were adult Poles and Jewish children. In the aforementioned story about Stefan Knoblauch (whose Jewish name had been forgotten by his rescuer), there is a glimpse of complicated family relations, there is also space for emotions and tenderness. Władysław Pawełek not only took care of the boy, but also enabled his parents to maintain contacts with their son, even though in 1942 this was highly risky.

Since the boy’s father was very concerned about his son throughout the period of his hiding (he may have been wary of us – after all we didn’t know each other before), he often asked through some informers whom we didn’t know, to see his child. We understood this, and despite the serious danger, I walked with him from Bochnia to Wola Batorska and back, about three times. [...] One winter, his mother, who missed him dearly, also came in a horse-drawn sleigh from Bochnia. This was easier, as she didn’t have Semitic looks. We were scared, as this was dangerous, but we understood her as a mother. (Pawełek, 1985)

Stefan was, as Pawełek recalls “handsome, nice and very intelligent”, he helped the family grind grain into flour, and stayed all the time in a well-shielded vestibule at the other entrance to the house, where it was dark, but he had a comfortable bed. “The boy gave us no trouble and we liked him very much” (Pawełek, 1985).

His hiding was additionally complicated by the fact that the Pawełek brothers were active in the Home Army and that partisans sometimes stayed at their house. Stefan

knew about the partisans, but the partisans could not find out about Stefan: “Not because of ill intentions, but because of loose tongues, the Gestapo may have found out in the end” (Pawełek, 1985). “Tell me that the main danger to Jews in the countryside were Poles without telling me that the main danger to Jews in the countryside were Poles” – one might joke grimly, paraphrasing a popular saying. This sentence could serve as a typical example of a statement that says everything about the context of providing aid to Jews, without calling by name the components of that context, namely the constant threat to those in hiding and those who hid them, from other Poles. There are plenty of such sentences in the rescuers’ accounts. Presumably they just “slip out”, without conscious formulation by the author of the utterance. The rules of discourse do not allow one to talk about the complicity of Poles in the Holocaust, but the facts have to be told somehow, hence the mention of the need for secrecy, denunciations, the “danger” and the “urgent need to evacuate”.

Let’s return to Stefan and to the Pawełek brothers. Władysław admits honestly, which doesn’t happen often, that he received money from Stefan’s father for the boy’s upkeep, thanks to which “we too could eat better and live a minimally better life”. Stefan, however, “due to complete lack of physical activity was putting on too much weight” (Pawełek, 1985). So, despite the danger, the family decided to provide cover for Stefan’s daily evening walk: they stood watch while the boy took several laps around the yard. They all lived to see the end of the war near Krakow, and Władysław Pawełek appeals to Stefan’s memory (for the article is an attempt to locate Knoblauch): “Stefan will surely remember how, right after liberation, we went hunting for wild ducks (sic) by the Vistula River or how we searched for unexploded bombs” (Pawełek, 1985). Soon Stefan, safe and sound, was picked up by his parents and they all left. In 1947, Stefan sent a photo to the Pawełek family from Bamberg, dedicated to them “by Stefan and his Parents”, which was printed with the article. Pawełek hopes that thanks to the article, the photo and the editorial board of *Fołks-Sztyme* he will be able to get in touch with Stefan, whom he and his entire family cordially invite to Łódź.

Stories such as those presented in the article “Miększe serca i trochę odwagi” or like the one of Stefan and the Pawełek family, open up the possibility of breaking through the official discourse, looking under its surface and reading the history of helping Jews as a history of human relations. However, there is a problem with this, something that can be used within the dominant discourse to defend it. The accumulation of such accounts, “human stories”, individualized slices of reality, gives the impression of apparent diversity, a recreation of a panorama of attitudes and behaviour. There were different facets to all this. There were self-sacrificing, brave Poles, there were grateful and ungrateful Jews. Some could be rescued, some could not. Perhaps the category of “narrative fetishism” introduced into memory studies by Eric L. Santner (Santner, 1992) would be useful here. Narrative fetishism allows us to divert attention from trauma by focusing on the narrative, the plot. The plot recounts the traumatic events, but it does so

“homeopathically” so to speak, dissolving them into a drama-structured story, usually with a positive ending. The recipient concentrates on the successive twists and turns of the plot, cheers on the characters, and does not have to confront the social context, the historical processes and the responsibility of the culture and individuals for the events that caused the trauma⁴⁰.

Interesting material for research on the “image of Jews” in Polish rescue memoirs is provided by “advertisements” published in the Polish-language part of *Folk-Sztyme* along with the series entitled *Kto ratuje jedno życie – ratuje cały świat* from the early 1980s until the end of its existence. They were intended to enable contact between rescuing Poles and rescued Jews. The purpose was to submit applications to the Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem “to count these noble people among the Righteous Among the Nations. We ask Jewish foreign press to reprint information regarding the people who are searched” – reads the headline of each instalment of the series. The goal, then, is clearly formulated: it’s all about medals for the Righteous. However, the accounts (which are based either on testimonies submitted to the Jewish Historical Institute or sent to the editors), most often end with words to this effect: Mr. or Mrs. X “is curious to know what happened to the people whose rescue he or she also has a part in”. There is no reason to be cynical about this; certainly at least some of the advertisers were genuinely curious about the post-war fates of the people they met under such special circumstances.

The column is such an interesting source because it appears in a Jewish newspaper with a special subtenant status, as I mentioned earlier. Poles write their stories addressing them to Jews, both the specific ones they seek, and to all other readers of the paper, as well as to the international audience (foreign press is asked to reprint the ads). So, the Poles must present their merits – the medal of the Righteous is at stake – but they must not directly and exaggeratedly focus on themselves. The survivors sought must be described in considerable detail: their names and surnames are given (or surnames

40 Elżbieta Janicka notes that trauma is not a value-laden term but a descriptive one; a situation of deep hurt “in which the subject is unable to assimilate an important part of his or her own experience, one of a borderline nature. To assimilate here means: to become aware of, to understand, to draw conclusions and to insert into an identity narrative, that is, a story about oneself.” Trauma can affect not only victims – perpetrators or co-perpetrators can also have problems assimilating the borderline experience. This “assimilation/non-assimilation” (in this case: of guilt and shame) is particularly relevant here (Janicka, 2015, p. 151).

Santner writes about narrative fetishism using the example of the German film *Heimat* from 1984, which was an answer to the American series *Holocaust*. *Heimat* was intended to reclaim the memories of Germans and the pleasure of talking about their own history, of which the American production had deprived them. According to the director of *Heimat*, Germans had abandoned their unique, Central European experience because they had been “morally terrorized by spectacles like *Holocaust*”. *Heimat* is therefore a work of resistance, meant to reflect the local histories, local experience, family memories, personal stories. Thus, for example, the focus on the love story of a German couple who met on Kristallnacht, and when she was injured with a glass shard, he dressed the wound. A few years later, after their wedding, they bought an apartment from the same Jew for whom the stones that caused the woman’s injury had been meant on that night (Santner, 1992, pp. 149–150). Concentration of personal, intimate stories, in which most importance is given to universal “human” emotions (love, jealousy, fear, gratitude) makes it possible to actively ignore the political, social and moral context.

alone where the first names are unknown⁴¹), as well as occupations, age, family status. The circumstances of the local extermination and persecution of Jews is provided, as is the information that the hidden people survived German occupation. If they hadn't, searching for them would have made no sense. Another "advantage" of the living over the dead.

Sometimes there is an admonition from the editors expressed in the form of "critical astonishment": "We, too, would like to know the reasons why Josef Lewin does not write to the people thanks to whom he managed to survive the hell of the occupation" (although the person searching for Lewin, Jan Tomaszczuk, whose family hid him for eighteen months in his own half-ruined house in a densely inhabited roadside village, where "it was difficult to keep a secret", writes only that he would like to know the further fate of Lewin, who emigrated to Australia) („Kto ratuje jedno życie – ratuje cały świat”, 1985b). Or: sisters Szoszana, Cyla and Fela Brzoza were "to never forget" their saviours. They were the daughters of a poor ghetto shoemaker who were given shelter by Mr. and Mrs. Biesiada. They arranged false documents for them, sent them to the countryside to stay with their friends, and then (it is not known how the girls ended up in Warsaw again) supported them "even when they themselves were without a roof over their heads after the Warsaw Uprising". After the war they all ended up together in Gliwice. In a letter sent from Israel in 1947 to the Jewish Committee in Gliwice, the sisters wrote "We came to them poor and shabby, no one wanted to take us in, and they did, they hid us and kept us until the end of the war". For many years, the sisters kept in touch by letter with their rescuers, calling them "dear Mom" and "dear Dad" in their correspondence and assuring them that they would never forget them. "And yet..." – sighs the editor of the column (MG) and adds: "perhaps a note about the humanitarian deeds of the Biesiadas, who saved their neighbours, will help restore the interrupted correspondence, and thus contribute to the moral honouring of these noble people?" („Kto ratuje jedno życie – ratuje cały świat”, 1983). Or: "One must be surprised by the fact that contact between Lilianna Alter and the noble Stupnicki women has not been maintained" („Kto ratuje jedno życie – ratuje cały świat”, 1982, p. 11). On the other hand, we don't learn much about Lilianna Alter herself, who was twelve years old in 1941, besides that she was the daughter of Hilary Alter and that she emigrated after the war. Although she lived with the "noble Stupnicki women" for four years, her character traits apparently did not get etched in their memory; the short note devotes a lot more space to how she was led out of the ghetto by Janina Stupnicka and her twelve-year-old daughter Anna. A photograph of all three of them, Janina, Anna and Lilianna, was published in the paper in order to refresh Lilianna's memory.

41 For example, when Ambroży Banaszczyk searches for three Jews, forced labourers from a labour camp in Ostrowiec Świętokrzyski, who asked him to let them hide on his farm. They were "Dajches (no first name, before the war he lived in Ożarów on the Vistula River. He owned a carbonated water factory there), Grossman (no first name, before the war he lived in Ostrowiec Świętokrzyski and worked there as a porter), Pakman (no first name and no information about where he came from or what his occupation was before the war)" („Kto ratuje jedno życie – ratuje cały świat”, 1985a).

Gratitude or ingratitude – assumed by the rescuers, for we know nothing about the feelings of the survivors they describe – becomes the probe of the victims’ decency here. This is how their moral worth is measured, removing into the shadows their suffering, their fear, the reasons why they were persecuted and sentenced to death. All this means a lot less than their attitude toward the “saviours”. It is one thing to recognize the danger that Poles exposed themselves to by hiding Jews or by helping them save their lives as a historical fact. It is a different thing altogether to demand gratitude from specific people. The latter is a kind of ethical arrogance (I’ll return to this category proposed by Maria Janion in a moment) and yet another practice that gives the rescuers priority over the survivors. Besides, the duty of gratitude entails the unspoken assumption of the grace of providing help to someone from outside the community, to someone who is “not one of us”, someone who is guilty of bringing danger to the helpers by merely existing.

Conclusions. Giving up ethical arrogance

In her essay *Porzucić etyczną arogancję* [Giving up Ethical Arrogance], Maria Janion noted that Polish culture has not worked through the Shoah, remaining stuck in 19th century heroic-martyrdom patterns, stereotypes on “‘dignity’ and ‘indignity’ of death; of attitudes that are ‘heroic’ and ‘non-heroic’” (Janion, 2011, p. 19). As a side note, this is not only a Polish problem. The researcher also addresses in her text Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List*, identifying it as an example of a “redemptive narrative”, which attempts “to make the events of the Holocaust coherent, to arrange them in such sequences as to derive from them a conclusion that salvages the sense of history and universal human morality” (Janion, 2011, p. 20). In other words, one could say that Polish culture’s response to the experience of World War II, including the annihilation of Polish Jews, was “more of the same”: more martyrdom, more heroism, more innocence in suffering. Maintaining this value of Polish culture is done either by marginalizing the Holocaust, by “not noticing” it, or by plugging the tragedy of the Jews into the story of Polish heroism. This, too, could be called ethical arrogance: it is an instrumentalization of the victims, but also an appropriation of their suffering and their stories of suffering. It’s the constant talking about oneself at someone else’s funeral. It’s also an arrogance of conscience – concern for its purity obscures concern for specific people’s lives. It’s a kind of moral narcissism in the style of Conrad’s Lord Jim (so dear to the generation of Columbuses), who ruminates about his failure to behave with dignity and heroism in the face of a shipwreck, although, after all, the passengers of the *Patma* survived! This, nonetheless, brings Jim no solace, as he is only interested in his own tarnished honour.

The analysis of narratives on rescuing Jews proves that the rescued people as individuals are of no interest to Poles, as the outcome of the rescue efforts is not important. This lack of interest reveals the subtenant condition of Jews in Polish culture, and the fixation on the right attitude of Poles cements the ethnocentrism of the community, revealing that it is based on the ethnic community (whatever that is supposed to mean) of Polishness, and thus Jews do not belong to it, they are an external, subordinate group. What counts is that “our people” did right by “the others”, and those others can talk about themselves. Defenders of Poland’s good name believe that they are in a war of memory, that the Jews are mourned by the whole world anyway, that they have great museums, a cultural machine and the support of America, so Poles must keep retelling their own version of events. In such a framing of the issue, there is no way to move beyond ethnic categories, no way to define the community other than as national community. In turn, the lack of interest in the suffering of the victims and in Jews as victims impedes thinking through the reasons for their persecution, understanding the mechanisms of antisemitism, fascism, exclusion, the construction of otherness. Instead of asking questions about what kind of dominant culture (not only in Poland), what kind of values and ideologies enabled the mass extermination of an arbitrarily defined group of people, one compulsively asserts the correct attitude of another culturally constructed group of people toward this event. Indeed, asking the questions would require stepping, at least for a moment, beyond the horizon of the nation-state (and perhaps questioning other axioms of European culture (See: Vullierme, 2016) and abandoning the illusions of an idealized past.

Mr Cogito
is alarmed by a problem
in the domain of applied mathematics

the difficulties we encounter
with operations of simple arithmetic
("Pan Cogito o potrzebie ścisłości" from Zbigniew Herbert's *Raport z oblężonego miasta*;
Herbert, 1983)

Perhaps it is time for Mr. Cogito to consider the following simple arithmetic operation from the domain of applied mathematics: if so many Poles rescued Jews, how come so few of them survived the Shoah in Polish territories?

Translated into English by Maja Jaros

Press titles used

Chrześcijanin w świecie, Folks-Sztyme, Gość Niedzielny, Ład, Myśl Społeczna, Polityka, Słowo Powszechne, Tygodnik Powszechny, Więź, Znak

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Żydzi w polskich opowieściach o ratowaniu Żydów (1968–1989)

Abstrakt: Artykuł jest analizą obrazu osób pochodzenia żydowskiego w polskich opowieściach o ratowaniu Żydów zamieszczanych w prasie PRL. Propozycję ramy metodologicznej stanowi zapożyczony z dyskursu filmoznawczego test Bechdel, w oryginalnym kontekście stosowany jako narzędzie pokazujące sposób obecności kobiet w dziełach filmowych. Autorka analizuje badany materiał pod kątem powtarzających się w nim klisz narracyjnych i porządku dyskursywnego wyznaczającego sposób mówienia o historii Polaków i Żydów w czasie okupacji niemieckiej, próbując jednocześnie sprawdzić, czy w ogóle i jak Żydzi są podmiotami tych opowieści. Konkluzja jest raczej negatywna – Żydzi służą w dyskursie za wehikuł opowieści o bohaterstwie Polaków i mają utwierdzać zarówno wspólnotę narodową, jak i opinię międzynarodową w przekonaniu o godnej postawie Polaków w obliczu zagłady Żydów.

Wyrażenia kluczowe: antysemityzm; Holokaust; historia polsko-żydowska; polski dyskurs publiczny; polityka pamięci; polski dyskurs publiczny w PRL; ratowanie Żydów przez Polaków podczas Holokaustu; Sprawiedliwi wśród Narodów Świata



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